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VS BATTLEFIELD

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OF THE
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STALKER 2

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL ACROSS THE MOST
DANGEROUS OPEN WORLD OF 2022

FUTURE

ISSUE 365



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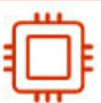
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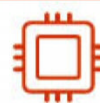
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“BIGGER, BLEAKER, AND MORE DANGEROUS THAN EVER BEFORE”



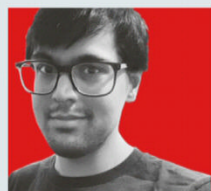
Sometimes, the best thing ever is taking a trip to somewhere absolutely horrible. In games, at least. Whether it's a barren wasteland, scorched post-apocalypse, or literal Hell, we love a grim digital world. And the irradiated wilderness that is the Zone is one of our all-time favourites.

So it's a thrill that not only is the *STALKER* series finally out of limbo and making its way back to our screens, but its new entry is a true open world – bigger, bleaker, and more dangerous than ever before. Read on, and discover a place where even the deer can kill you...

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
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The PC Gamer team



TYLER COLP
Twitter
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This month
Can a team really include two Tylers? Thanks to our latest addition, we're about to find out. Exciting.



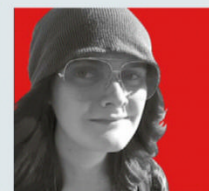
FRASER BROWN
Twitter
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This month
Fought through agonising tooth pain to bring you yet another historical strategy game article.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
[@screencuisine](https://twitter.com/screencuisine)

This month
Had a blast writing our *STALKER 2* feature. He was practically glowing.



NAT CLAYTON
Twitter
[@its_natclayton](https://twitter.com/its_natclayton)

This month
Visited a real-life Witcher bar, and drank enough 'potions' to suffer some serious debuffs.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



GRAND THEFT LOTTO

GTA: THE TRILOGY had one of the greatest launch disasters of recent times

Rockstar launched *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy* on November 11, 2020, just over 20 years after the launch of *GTA III*: one of the most important games in history. There were high expectations. But what no one expected was a catastrophe.

The *GTA Trilogy* launched and, a few hours later, the Rockstar Games Launcher went down and the games were pulled from sale. The launcher came back a day later but the *Trilogy* remained unavailable to play or purchase for three days. Rockstar said the *Trilogy* was, “Unavailable to

play or purchase as we remove files unintentionally included in these versions.” This was one problem. The launch *Trilogy* included a bunch of unlicensed music tracks and in-code developer comments. Even more unbelievably, some modders found the code for the infamous Hot Coffee minigame in *San Andreas*.

DATAMINERS FOUND THE TRILOGY SHIPPED WITH SONGS THAT HAVE BEEN ‘REMOVED’

PC Gamer asked Vadim M, a GTA modder, what exactly was left in the *Trilogy*’s files. “The developers left in the files uncompiled mission/script sources. This is an internal file where they coded scripts in the ‘native language’ and made notes.”

OUT OF TUNE

Such things aren’t intended for the public, but aren’t a huge deal. However some dataminers found the *Trilogy* shipped with songs that have been ‘removed’ because the licences have expired. I asked Ash R, another modder, whether the songs were playable. “Yes these are playable after being extracted,” writes Ash R. “For

BATTLEFARM 2042

XP TRAP



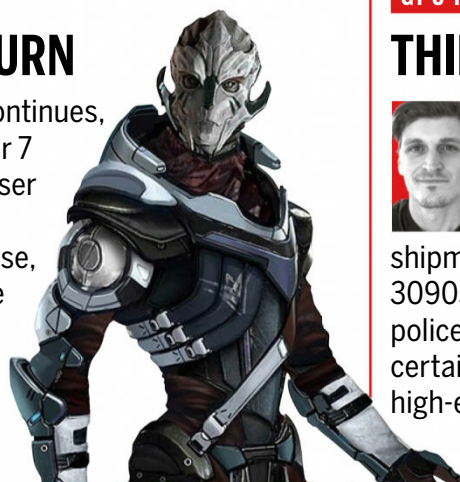
Predictably, *Battlefield Portal*'s suite of 'make-your-own *Battlefield*' tools were quickly abused to create quick 'n' dirty XP farms. But thanks to server quirks, many players quickly found themselves on the unarmed bot team, living fodder for other players to grind against. ■ NC

MASSIVE SURPRISE

MASS EFFECT TO RETURN



The N7 Day tradition continues, and this past November 7 BioWare dropped a teaser image promising that, "Mass Effect will return." No surprise, really: *Andromeda* bombed but the *Legendary Edition* was a bigger-than-expected hit, and fans are eager for more. ■ AC



GPU HEIST

THIEVES HIJACK TRUCK



A literal truck load of graphics cards was stolen in California in early November, containing an entire shipment of cards including Nvidia RTX 3090s and 3060s. No-one was hurt and police continue to investigate, but it certainly shows the absurd rarity of high-end hardware at the moment. ■ JR



TOP: "This shit doesn't work the way they wrote it below so we'll just show the text and place the blip at the beginning of the mission," reads one of the developer comments left in the game's code.

ABOVE: This is one hell of an echo of the *San Andreas* Hot Coffee farrago, a removed sex minigame that modders eventually accessed, resulting in a controversy that ran for years and ultimately resulted in an investigation into Rockstar by the Federal Trade Commission.

San Andreas every song is there: Ozzy, James Brown, Rage Against The Machine, 2Pac."

This could be a headache for Rockstar. "In short yes I think they could get in trouble even if access were limited," business lawyer Richard Hoeg says. "They (presumably) don't have the right to distribute those songs. Now, the fact that you'd have to do some significant things to get them to operate might be [at] least a partial defence to a full legal claim, but what we are really talking about here is content holders getting upset before anyone goes to court [...] I think the publisher has every reason to be concerned."

This is all highly embarrassing for Rockstar, a publisher that until now had a well-earned reputation for polish and high production values. This is also just one side of *GTA Trilogy*'s launch woes: the quality of the ports is extremely poor, with bizarre implementations of features like rain, terribly re-done textures, and various glitches. For Rockstar to have sent out its flagship titles, the games that made it what it is, in such a sorry state suggests a severe lack of oversight on this project. *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy* may be back on-sale, but it'll be some time before it can be considered worthy of the games it was supposed to 'remaster'.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Kasparov plays Hearthstone

PCG spoke to former world chess champ Garry Kasparov, "Yes, I do play *Hearthstone*. I'm diamond five!"

Surprise Halo

Microsoft announced an early launch for *Halo Infinite* multiplayer.

So long Bowser

Nintendo sued a 52 year-old Canadian man who was selling emulators. His name? Gary Bowser...

Premium Access

Many 'premium' games are now launching with early access weeks: but only if you've bought a deluxe or ultimate edition. This sucks.

Squid name

Streamer SquidGame got a lot of grief over their name, picked in 2010.

NFT rush

EA, Epic, and Ubisoft are among the big-hitters declaring their interest in NFTs.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

We're now 20% of the way through the '20s, and already some of the decade's defining trends are starting to emerge. If you ask The Spy, the main question of the era is now: what happens when a civilisation that

became too online during the period it was collectively locked indoors has to reemerge and face the outside world? I'm sure it was fun and exciting being horny when you were stuck inside with nothing to do all day except post about the Castlevania cartoon, but now you have to actually look your boss in the eye.

A new culture war is forming. On one side is a group of people who have spent thousands of dollars on a URL to a monkey jpg. On the other, it's furies. They are battling for the very soul of Discord. It's easy to dismiss this all as confusing and stupid, because it is. But that doesn't mean it's not also important. When all is said and done, all we can really hope for is that the dystopian layer of augmented reality social hangouts and workplaces we'll all be forced to use isn't owned by Mark Zuckerberg.

In times like this, there's comfort in instead looking back at the familiar and unchallenging. By which The Spy means there's another round of *GTA* rumours to tackle.

In an episode of the Rolling Stone Music Now podcast, Snoop Dogg

teased an upcoming collaboration between Dr Dre – who The Spy *knows* you didn't forget – and Rockstar. "I do know he's in the studio," Dogg said. "I do know he's making great fucking music. And some of his music is connected to the *GTA* game that's coming out. So I think that will be the way that his music will be released, through the *GTA* videogame."

LEAK TRADING

This, naturally, sparked rumours and speculations about *GTA VI*, because *everything* sparks rumours and speculation about *GTA VI*. "*GTA VI* just got LEAKED," shouted one YouTuber, unbothered by the fact that it didn't. "*GTA VI* just got some major news" barks a website, even thought that didn't happen. Sure, Snoop did use the words "the *GTA* game that's coming out", implying a future release. But consider: Snoop Dogg – a 50-year-old man – is not familiar with content cycles and marketing doublespeak that underpins the live service era. The Spy would suggest that this release could simply be an update for *GTA Online*.

That, at least, would go some way to explaining Dre's appearance in the Cayo Perico heist, one of the most baffling cameos of our age. In a cutscene during one of the heist's prep missions, he arrives at an airport, gets a call saying his phone full of unreleased music has been stolen, and promptly leaves. There is no explanation for any of this, and, if The Spy can take a moment to offer some acting critique, his vocal delivery is so blandly expressionless that it's impossible to tell whether this is some big tease for a future event. But it would certainly be in the spirit of *GTA Online* to both tease a future update in-game, *and* to do it in such a hamfisted way that nobody realises what is happening.

Perhaps The Spy can take heart in the fact that we're all facing the challenges of this era – whether we're dropping absurd amounts of cash on an ugly, procedurally generated lion avatar, or we're Dr Dre trying to navigate the post-*Fortnite* world of videogame cross-media promotion. We're all just muddling our way through. Spy out. ■
The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy has never been less fungible.

AN UPCOMING COLLABORATION BETWEEN DR DRE AND ROCKSTAR

This month in... 2011



1 A games magazine on sale in December? It can only mean one thing: the Game of the Year awards. 2011 features a pretty good slate of winners: there's *Battlefield 3*, *Portal 2*, *Total War: Shogun 2*, *League of Legends*, and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* among them. And the Game of the Year prize-winner itself? It was *Skyrim*, of course. Wait, when did we review *Skyrim*?

ISSUE
235, January 2012
ON THE COVER
Star Wars: The Old Republic
IN CINEMAS
Puss in Boots

2 Ah, it was *also* in this issue. Tom Francis devotes six pages to *The Elder Scrolls*, awarding it 94%. Maybe that's why Bethesda hasn't stopped rereleasing it.



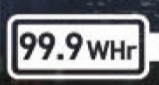
3 Enough looking back: this issue also offered up our picks for the PC games to watch in the year to come, 2012, including *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Dishonored*, *Bioshock Infinite*, *Guild Wars 2*, *Dota 2*, and *Mass Effect 3*. But don't think our powers of prediction were quite so flawless: we also give shout outs to *Hitman: Absolution* and, er, *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. Can't win 'em all.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



MAP QUEST

The diehard **GAMEFAQS** user who's drawn over 3,500 maps

When a post praising the thousands upon thousands of game walkthrough maps created by a GameFAQs poster named StarFighters76 circulated on Twitter, the astounded responses weren't only from people seeing them for the first time. Tons of replies were from players who'd used his maps before, but had no idea just how many he'd created. "These maps have gotten me out of SO MANY jams bro," says one. "Shout if you've been using these maps for the FF Pixel Remasters," says another. The collection of over 3,500 maps that StarFighters76 has created is impressive, but the number of players he's helped through more than 300 games may be even more so.

For nearly 20 years, StarFighters76 has been posting maps to GameFAQs, one of the few surviving institutions from the '90s era of videogame websites. Although his maps have changed some over the years, it's no surprise that people recognised them. Since the early 2000s, StarFighters76 has created maps with bright, basic

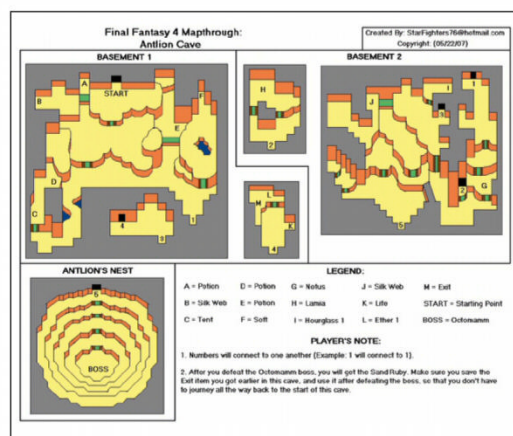
colour palettes and thin black lines that make no secret of their Microsoft Paint origins.

They look simplistic at first – and some of his early maps were certainly more pared-down versions of what he now produces – but even his early work contains numbered legends, helpful arrows, and other instructions that elevate his maps from artistic recreations to actual visual walkthroughs with puzzle solutions and directed paths. They stand out on GameFAQs, which most of us associate with guides submitted as plain text files.

"I actually use the old school MSPaint, like from the early 2000s," StarFighters76 says. Aside from being an antique, old-school Paint really isn't a forgiving program.

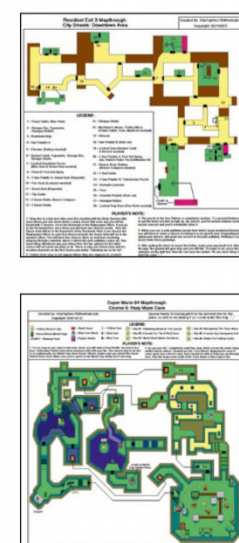
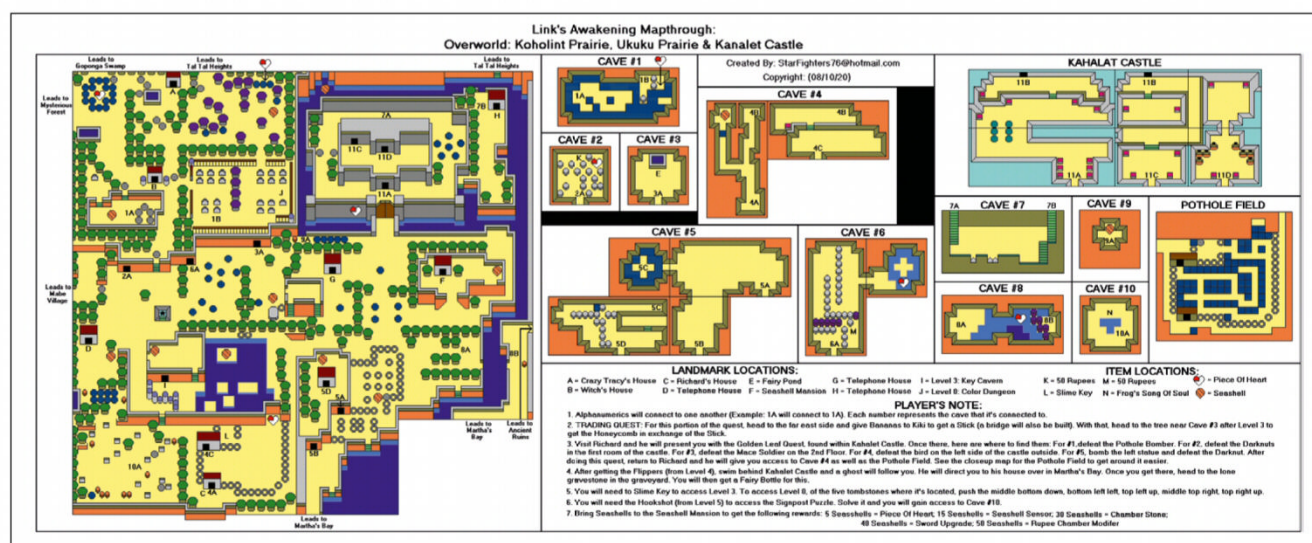
He could keep his visual style while using a program that adds flexibility with layers and more powerful tools. "I should, honestly," he says when I ask if he's ever considered changing. "But MSPaint has been with me since day one and hasn't let me down yet so I don't want to turn my back on it."

Like his choice of software, StarFighters76 says that his process has largely remained unchanged all these years too. He starts out by drawing a game map out on paper



FAQs facts

GameFAQs originated as the Video Game FAQ Archive created by Jeff 'CJayC' Veasey in 1995, accepting requests and volunteer submissions for game guides and answers. By the time StarFighters76 started posting maps, it was already the go-to for thousands of players. Today, it hosts a database of guides and answers for over 200,000 games.

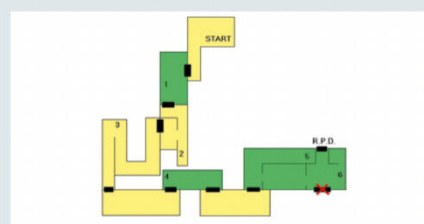


FAR LEFT: StarFighter76's maps of *Link's Awakening* are as artistic as they are instructive.

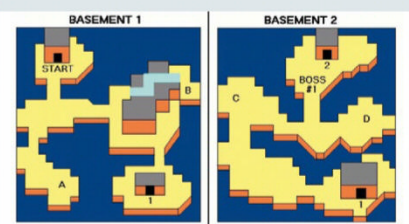
ABOVE LEFT: Even with a boxy layout and basic colours, you might recognise this Raccoon City map.

LEFT: For an even greater challenge, StarFighters76 took on the fully 3D world of *Super Mario 64*.

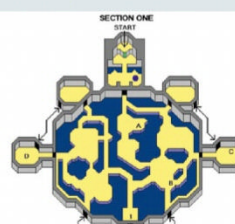
MAP EXPANSION How StarFighters76's maps have evolved over 20 years



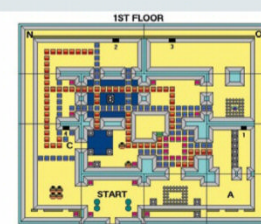
2004
The map of the Raccoon City Streets in *Resident Evil 2* uses annotations and some basic colours as direction.



2007
The Cave of Bahamut in *Final Fantasy IV* includes pseudo 3D and some complementary colours for clarity.



2013
By 2013, this map of *Chrono Trigger's* Ocean Palace uses more complex shapes, pseudo 3D, and pattern effects.



2020
Another *Link's Awakening* map from 2020, the Eagle's Tower, shows an eye for detail and consistency.

while he plays, taking notes that he'll need for later. Eventually he switches over to recreating those sketches in Paint, going back and forth between drawing and playing.

"The game itself has to catch my attention in some way for me to work on it," he says. "Whether it's the game itself, or the particular layout of the game, there has got to be that special something that pulls me in." In *Resident Evil*, navigation is actually part of the game's puzzle. For the early *Zelda* games, it's a joy just to see entire game areas contiguously laid out in a way that only a good map can make immediately comprehensible.

"It's much more fun to map things out while exploring something new, because I am always curious about what's around the corner to discover," he says, though he's also worked on mapping out some old favourites. "It gives me a chance to relive the fun I had with them, as well as appreciate those games for what they are."

STAR CONTRIBUTOR

StarFighters76 has been posting his maps on GameFAQs for nearly 20 years, giving his work nearly the same longevity as the site itself. "GameFAQs was the first gaming site I went to when looking for help," he says. "It's kinda become my internet home."

StarFighters76 originally created written walkthroughs too. Some of his old guides still contain hallmarks of the early 2000s era: large text art introductions and maps recreated in text form. Despite those early walkthroughs and his continued practice of creating maps that contain text notes, the act of mapping is what he truly enjoys.

"I've been into mapping since I was a teenager," StarFighters76 says, explaining how he would explore nearby neighbourhoods as a kid and has since recreated his own map of his city multiple times. "Because I have taught myself how to navigate throughout my city, friends have literally called me their 'human GPS.'"

That sense of dedication is the connecting factor in how StarFighters76 talks about every part of his lengthy history drawing maps. There's something to envy in that ongoing commitment. I've always wanted to be someone who could say I'd been posting on the same message boards for a decade. Over where the grass appears greener, StarFighter76 says it isn't just sunshine all the time.

"After I reached 3,000 maps back in 2019, I wasn't sure what I was gonna do," he says. "Don't get me wrong, the art of game mapping is fun by itself.

But doing it for 20 years can get to me

at times because I feel like I've done all I could do, even though there is tons more I could be doing."

The wave of gratitude for StarFighter76's maps spurred by that tweet changed things for him. Players who remembered his maps showed up in droves to comment their thanks. The amount of attention it gathered caught him by surprise. "I needed that," he says. "Being on Twitter has helped give me that boost in motivation just a bit."

With 3,519 maps currently to his name on GameFAQs, StarFighters76 has spent two decades dedicated to his style. Here's hoping that a quick injection of internet appreciation carries him through to 4,000 and beyond. ■

Lauren Morton

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

TRY, TRY AGAIN

How **N: THE WAY OF THE NINJA** became the PC's best platformer – then got better

If limitations breed creativity, then today's developers have it harder than ever. With free access to the world's top game engines – not to mention the knowledge bank of an entire industry available through Twitter, YouTube, and Discord – there's little holding them back. When two Toronto students named Mare Sheppard and Raigan Burns set out to make a platformer back in 2001, however, they had nothing but limitations.

"We both had old computers that couldn't run AAA games," Burns remembers. "But they could run freeware games no problem." For a couple of years he played *Soldat* – a twist on *Worms* built around jet boots. "If you jump and then thrust, you can fly upwards," Burns says. "Because your jump momentum is added to the thrust momentum." It turned out to be a simple piece of code to copy.

Then, one day, a Bungie dev in a Usenet group called Game Dev Algorithms shared how object collision worked in *Halo*. "The thing is," Burns says, "there wasn't a lot of good information out on the internet back then." And so *N: The Way of the Ninja* was born – a platformer about building momentum, and avoiding collisions.

Metanet didn't have Unreal Engine 4 or instant publishing through Steam – instead it had Adobe Flash, which could be used to make 2D games. "When we were using it, it only had vector rendering, which looked beautiful, but was really, really slow," Burns says. "The speed was proportional to the number of pixels that changed every frame, so we knew from the beginning – no

scrolling. And everything should be as small as possible, so that the number of pixels changing is low."

Inspired in part by the Japanese freeware game *Puchiwara no Bouken*, the pair made the player's ninja a tiny stick figure, who navigated brutalist rooms made up of grey, angular passageways. The maps involved mine-strewn chicanes, homing rocket death strips and hundreds of retries, but they never took up more than a single screen. "Parkour was starting to be a thing," Burns says. "Once we had that additive momentum vertically, wall jumping became very acrobatic, because you could gain speed."

Metanet leaned into the difficulty, but was smart about it. Sheppard and Burns used their independent status to question the wisdom of inherited platforming traits like Game Over screens. "There was definitely a sense that certain concepts in game design were stuck in the past or just sucked," Burns says.

"A lot of times we were pushing back," Sheppard adds. "Why do they have to always be this way?" Though *N* was tough, it wasn't punishing – once you died, the screen simply reset, and you tried again. Hit points and extra lives were just two more things Metanet didn't need to work out how to program.

"The minimalism was definitely an explicit thing we wanted to do, but it was because we knew we were just two people and we were learning," Burns says. "So we simplified and got rid of all the window dressing."

When *N* was released, the browser version ran badly – not that players of the time cared. You didn't turn your nose up at a free game back then. Not when it let you soar like Sonic starring in an off-Broadway production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

THE N'D

Since then, Metanet has only published new iterations of *N*. "We've made a bunch of other stuff," Burns says. "It's just, nothing is good enough. We don't really want to release a game unless we have as much fun playing it as we have playing *N*, which is a pretty high bar for us to meet."

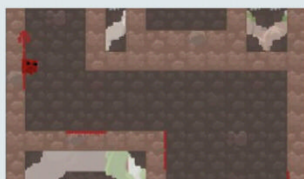
Even *N+* and *N++*, the critically acclaimed commercial follow-ups to the free project, aren't sequels as such. Burns describes them as further excavations – attempts to pull a perfect statue from the marble of that original idea.

"We were definitely aware that there was this latent potential that we had accidentally hit upon with *N*," he says. "It wasn't until we were making *N++* that we realised that playing the game is about this perfectionism, and that's us. It's like a fractal." ■

Jeremy Peel

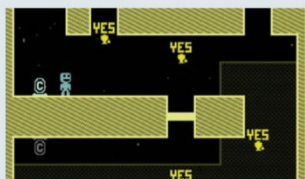
KING BROWSER

These web platformers were no Flash in the pan



MEAT BOY

There are dozens of Flash projects in Ed McMillen's back catalogue, many of them disgustingly gory, but only this one spawned the defining precision platformer of the '00s.



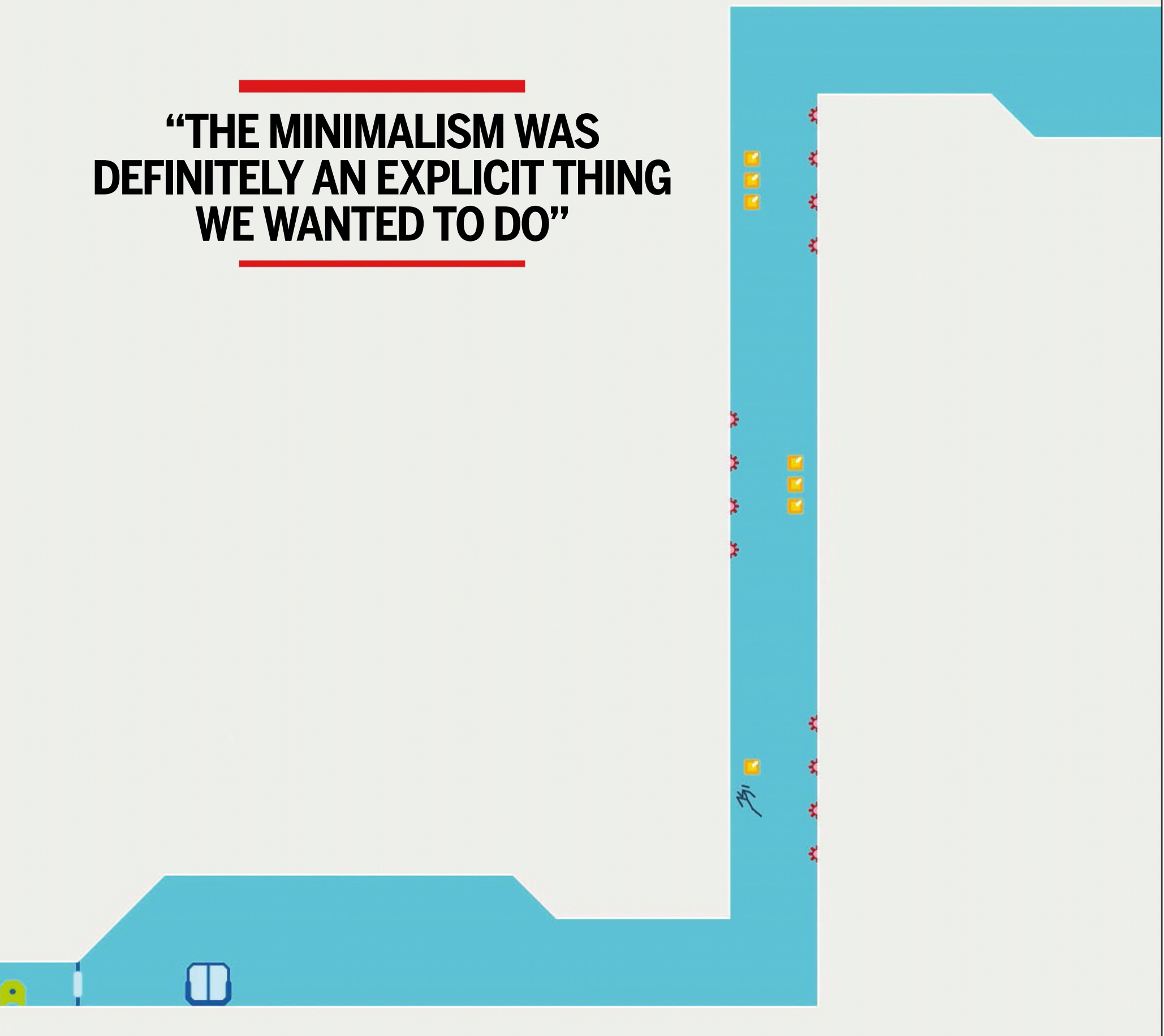
VVVVVV

From previous column guest Terry Cavanagh, this gravity-flipping adventure paints with simple colours – both in its garish maps and emotive characters – to quite extraordinary effect.

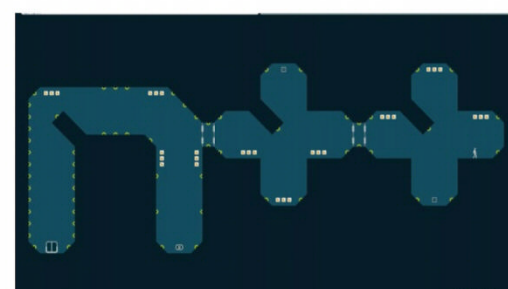
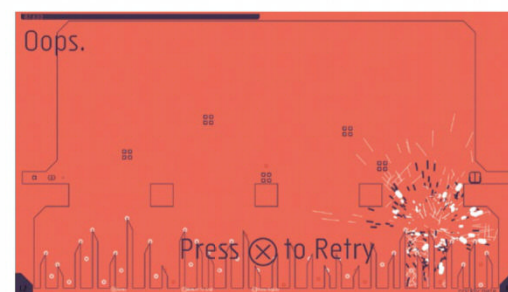


CELESTE

Now known as *Celeste Classic*, this journey up a mountain with a girl who can only jump and dash became the basis for a superb meditation on anxiety. Sounds unlikely, I know.



**“THE MINIMALISM WAS
DEFINITELY AN EXPLICIT THING
WE WANTED TO DO”**



LEFT: There's a lot of this in a typical *N++* play session.

DNA Tracing

GAMING LINEAGES EXPLORED

ONE TEAM HAS RETAINED
NOT ONLY ITS DISTINCT
IDENTITY BUT A DEGREE
OF WIDER RECOGNITION

BACK FROM THE DEAD

How **TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS** righted itself after rolling on its back

One commonly accepted piece of games industry wisdom is that ideas are cheap; everybody has them. It's the execution that's difficult and expensive. But it's evidently not a philosophy shared by Valve, which has long bought its best ideas.

Counter-Strike, *Portal*, *Team Fortress*, *Dota* – all were first dreamed up outside Valve by modders or students. Again and again, the studio has acted as a kind of incubator – hiring on creators and giving them resources and expertise, so that they can take those magic ideas to their big-budget conclusion.

Often, in time, those creators fade into the grey anonymity of Valve – contributing to the studio's brain trust in ways both crucial and imperceptible to the general public. But one team has retained not only its distinct identity but a degree of wider recognition: Turtle Rock, the outfit behind *Left 4 Dead*.

Perhaps that's because Turtle Rock built the vast majority of its most famous game as an independent. Valve had reason to trust the studio – as a contractor, Turtle Rock had effectively become the custodian of *Counter-Strike* – and so largely left its team alone during *Left 4 Dead*'s development, providing funding and the services of acclaimed *Portal* writer Chet Faliszek.

Valve's greatest contribution to *Left 4 Dead* was actually the organic and full-throated enthusiasm of its staff, who quickly adopted the game for their play sessions outside work. They demonstrated the argument – so obvious to us now – that the FPS genre was missing a trick with casual co-op. Turtle Rock was reacting against *Counter-Strike*'s baked-in competition; put simply, the team was sick of fighting each other.

COUNTER, TERROR

What began as a goofy *CS* mod named *Terror* – in which bloodily-textured bots armed with knives ran eerily at a squad of four friends – became the follow-up to *Half-Life 2*. Valve acquired its developer briefly before launch, which meant Turtle Rock's name wasn't on the box. But not long afterwards, the studio spun out on its own again. As Valve South, the team had missed its independence, and struggled to communicate with its

colleagues 800 miles away in Seattle. In the end, it was Gabe Newell who suggested a return to the way things had been – signing back Turtle Rock's name and logo. Valve would handle *Left 4 Dead 2* internally, while Turtle Rock worked on its DLC (as well as more *Counter-Strike*, the studio's spiritual default).

As you know, *Left 4 Dead* changed the industry. Alongside *28 Days Later*, it rehabilitated cheesy old zombies in pop culture, rendering them terrifying once again with a simple speed buff. What's more, Turtle Rock's easygoing, chat-friendly approach to PvE – in which it paid to put the team before yourself – paved the way for *COD: Zombies*, *Payday*, and *Vermintide*.

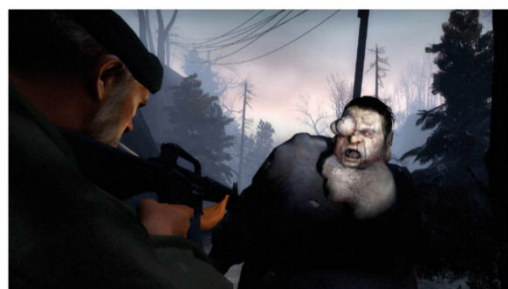
Yet it was the game's lesser-played Versus mode that mapped a path to the studio's future. There, four players took on the roles of the Special Infected, mastering bizarre abilities with the goal of halting and separating a team of survivors as they pushed through a campaign map. Where competitive shooters had traditionally balanced two teams with identical toolsets, *Left 4 Dead* embraced asymmetry, asking zombie players to become walking bombs and sentient lassos.

STAGE TWO

Evolve took that imbalance to its logical endpoint, tipping the seesaw as far as it would go. Turtle Rock's sophomore effort cast a single player as a monster, and four others as the hunters tasked with trapping and killing the beast. One side was playing a co-op shooter in the mould of *Predator*; the other a strange stealth game about troughing on an alien ecosystem until you were so engorged as to be unstoppable.

"This ain't about just running around and shooting bad guys like you're some kind of goddamned Navy Seal or

BELOW: Boom boom boom boom, please give me some room.

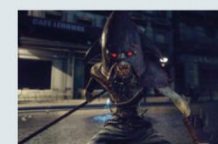


4 + 1 = 0

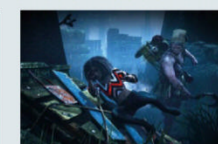
The great asymmetrical multiplayer struggle



FABLE LEGENDS
Lionhead's last big project installed one player as the Dungeon Master, working against four heroes as they embarked on high fantasy quests. But it died with the developer.



SHADOW REALMS
Built by the Bioware studio behind *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. The Shadowlord would have controlled creatures and set traps – if it hadn't been scrapped.



DEAD BY DAYLIGHT
The exception to the curse: a playable slasher flick in which one player becomes the killer. So successful that it's hosted monsters from Halloween and *Stranger Things*.

SLOW AND STEADY

Turtle Rock's long road to indie success



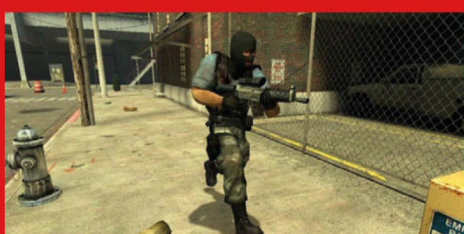
COUNTER-STRIKE

Turtle Rock's Chris Ashton made textures for *de_dust*, don't you know.



COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO

Turtle Rock helped finish this one.



COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE

The predecessor to *Global Offensive*.



HALF-LIFE 2

Seminal first-person shooter.



PORTAL

Demonstrated Chet Faliszek's way with words.



LEFT 4 DEAD

You can still find a match at any time of day on Steam.



LEFT 4 DEAD 2

A quick sequel from Valve's internal team.



BACK 4 BLOOD

Turtle Rock reclaims its bloody crown.

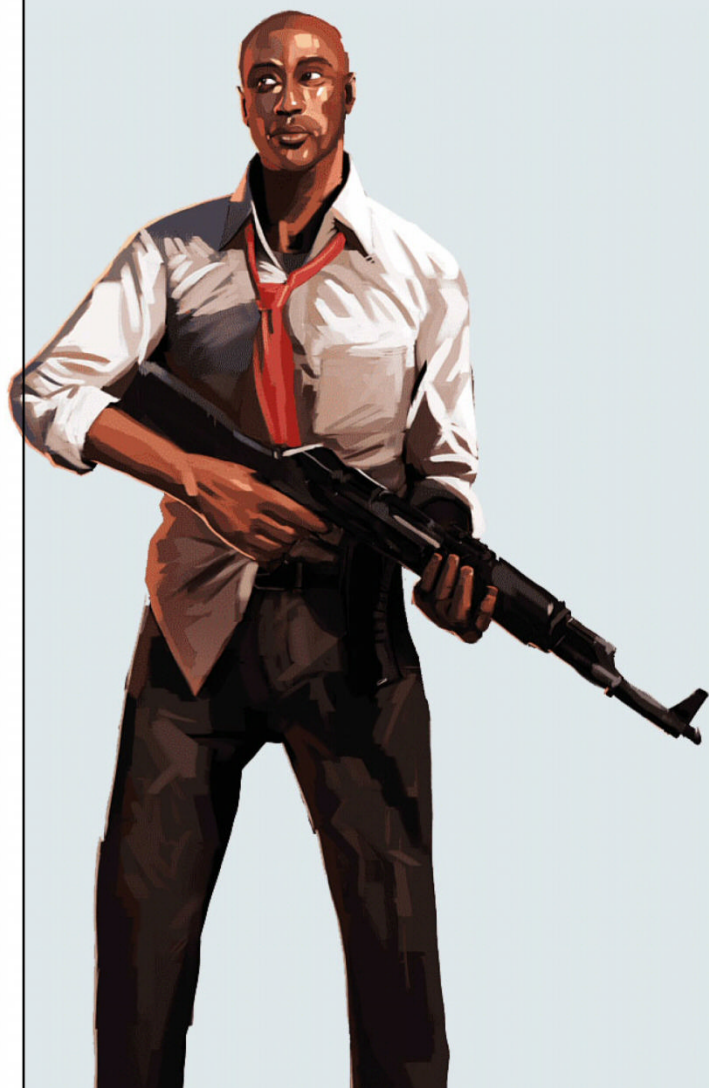


EVOLVE

An admirable but overambitious failure.

KEY

- Turtle Rock Studios
- Valve



» whatever,” drawled your guide in *Evolve*’s tutorial. “You are hunting a monster on an alien planet, and that ain’t like anything else. You already know how to use a gun and run around and how to face which direction and all that bullshit – you’re not an idiot. We’re gonna teach you monster hunting. It may seem... it’s a lot to deal with, but after only like three or five matches, you’ll get it.”

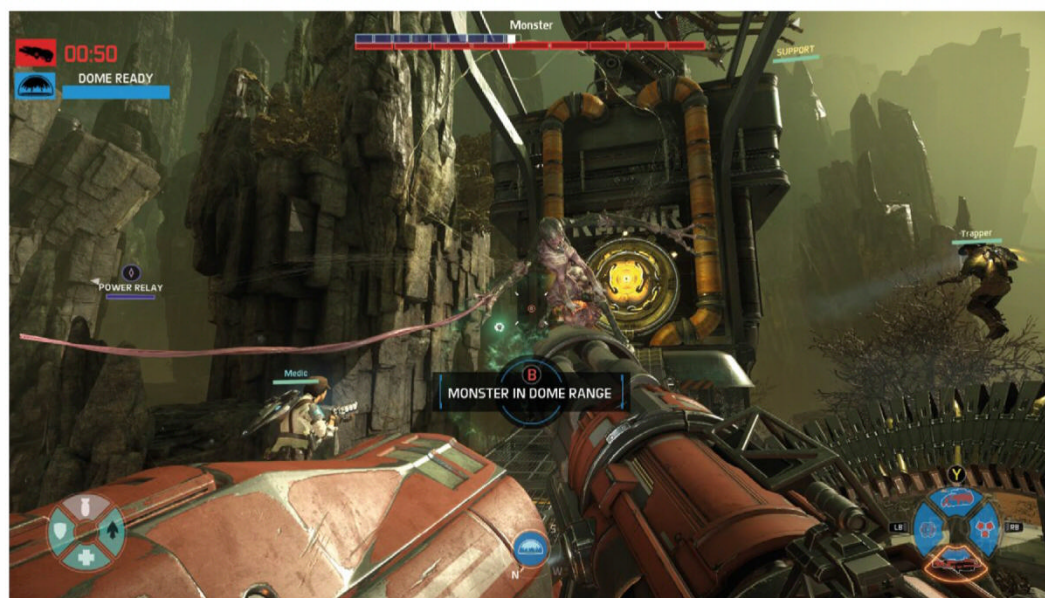
It’s hard to know whether Turtle Rock’s high opinion of players – both their intelligence, and their appetite for novelty – would have been rewarded in the long-term. *Evolve* was already hamstrung at release by a punitive pricing policy, introduced by 2K, who had picked up the game after original publisher THQ went bankrupt.

“If your customer needs to find four friends to enjoy your game, maybe don’t charge \$60 for it,” says Turtle Rock lead writer Matt Colville in a Reddit postmortem three years ago. “Because getting your friends to spend a total of \$240 on a game is a hard fucking sell. We were already thinking about this. We knew this, and THQ knew it. Alas, THQ went tits up.”

TURN LEFT

Evolve ultimately went tits up too, shutting down after a brief free-to-play redesign. Besides the price, Colville partly attributes that outcome to sheer design challenge. “It wasn’t just asymmetrical,” he says. “The two sides were playing fundamentally different games. That was a problem we never solved. It meant all new content was a colossal pain to implement, forget balance.”

Given the cost of all that ambition, it should be no surprise that Turtle Rock has since retreated to more familiar ground. This year it put out *Back 4 Blood* – the *Left 4 Dead 3* that Valve, with its democratised development process, seems unable to rally its workforce around. *Back 4 Blood*’s genius is that it



preserves *Left 4 Dead*’s core in amber – or, if you prefer, secures it in a safe room. The modern touches intended to give the game longevity, like the deck of unlockable cards that offer percentage tweaks to health or reload time, are merely layered on top – there to be engaged

with if you want to, or not. Turtle Rock knows better than to mess with the rock, paper, scissors simplicity of its premise. A hulking boss is still best dealt with using napalm; a horde lured away with a pipe bomb.

It’s not exactly evolution. In fact, if Turtle Rock were a monster from its most famous failure, you could say it had reverted to Stage 1, rather than grown into its most powerful,

final form. But let’s allow the studio this one, fond throwback. Doesn’t Turtle Rock deserve to rest on its laurels when, for so many years, those laurels were mistakenly handed to Valve instead? ■

Jeremy Peel

“THE TWO SIDES WERE PLAYING FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT GAMES”

ABOVE: Trapping a sentient, player-driven beast in *Evolve* was an undeniable thrill.

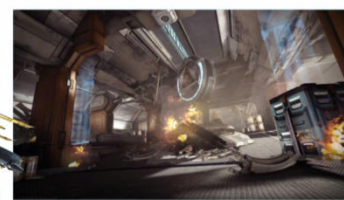
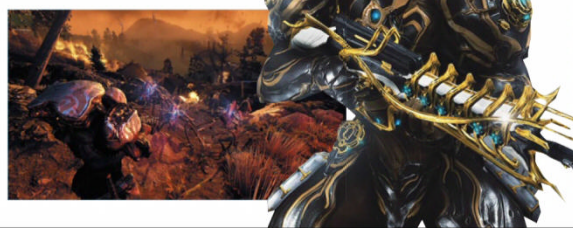
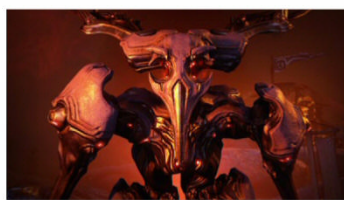
Shooting zombies through the bars of the saferoom door is a hobby in itself.



PREVIEW



Warframe: The New War



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December

DEVELOPER
Digital Extremes

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
warframe.com

WARFRAME: THE NEW WAR

The latest update is an epic years in the making

It feels like only yesterday *Warframe* was just that odd little free to play game with the space ninjas. Now it's a sprawling sci-fi epic that contains everything from open world mech battles to ship-to-ship space combat. *Warframe's* next update, *The New War*, isn't simply a burst of more content, intended to pad out a service game treadmill with new chores to grind. It's a huge story campaign: the latest chapter in a lavish saga about the solar system protecting Tenno and the return of an old enemy. One that's been a long time coming.

"*The New War* has been the grand vision for years," Rebecca Ford, live operations and community director, tells me. A *Warframe* stalwart, Rebecca has been with Digital Extremes for nine years, helping to build and steer its story alongside managing its community. She's even the voice of Lotus, the player's guide and mentor. "I don't think there's been a time since it was announced in 2018 that someone wasn't thinking about how to start making it awesome, start testing it, start building assets, the concepts, everything has been part of that."

PRIME TIME

For anyone who's been playing *Warframe*, they'll be no stranger to its flair for story driven content but *The New War* moves the focus back to the centre. "Last year we dropped that open world, Heart of Deimos, it had a story quest, it moved the story along... story-seeking players were

quite happy, but that's a different flavour from what *The New War* is. It's full-on, cinematic, about your relationship to the main characters in the game." It's the kind of content Digital Extremes gets excited to share. "For us, because this is the most personal content we make, we consider it our banner types of content. We put so much into it. It's really a singleplayer campaign, right? You can see how devs react when players reach a certain point in *God of War* or those very narrative [focused] experiences. This is that, for us."

It's also the biggest campaign they've done to date. "It's definitely longer than any quest we've ever done." But players should brace themselves. "*The New War* will take several hours – prepare accordingly, because your normal *Warframe* activities will not be available."

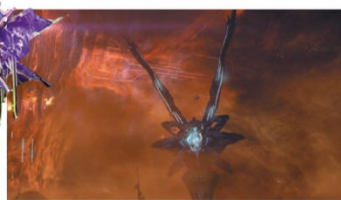
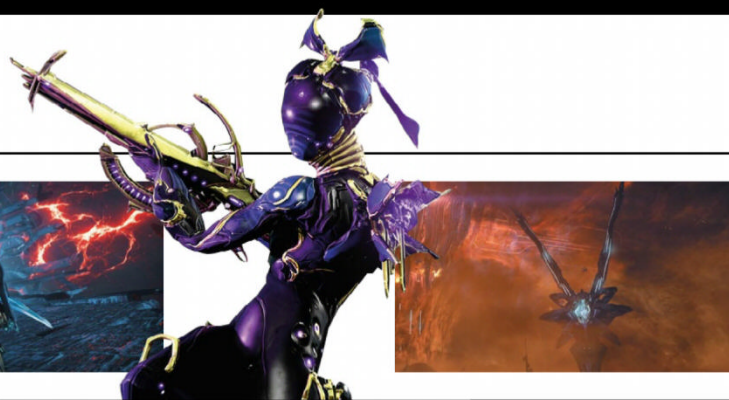
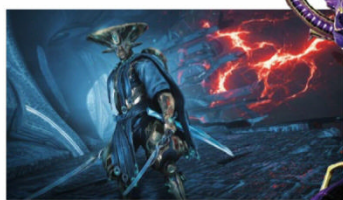
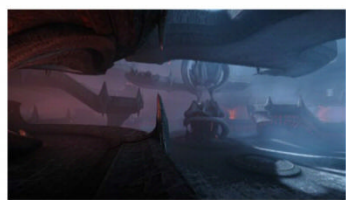
The New War also has a grander scope than ever before. As new big bads the Sentients arrive in the solar system, players will be stepping outside their Tenno shoes and taking control of characters in the factions that have previously served as your foe.

MAGNUM CORPUS

Seeing the universe through the eyes of what has been, for the player, cannon fodder should give it a new sense of scale. With properties like *Dune* ascendant, *Warframe* feels poised to capitalise on an audience eager for dense, political world building and strange science fiction concepts. However, even though this is a dark, dramatic beat in the story, *Warframe* isn't afraid to have fun. The cloned foot soldier in the Grineer army you control is bossed around by a comically over the top drill sergeant type officer, while the weak, robot commanding lad in the hyper capitalist Corpus faction is following the instructions of a flippant, self centred corporate overlord, whose disregard is too much to be anything other than laughable. It's this degree of personality that helps *Warframe* stay away from becoming some self serious sci-fi game, too obsessed with its own lore. Even as *The New War* escalates things, it makes plenty of time for the sillier, characterful elements that have made the game such a delight.

Though don't expect to spend all of *The New War* in these shoes. "You will

POISED TO CAPITALISE ON AN AUDIENCE EAGER FOR DENSE, POLITICAL WORLD BUILDING

Warframe: The New War

» certainly be needing a *Warframe* of choice and your operator as the main playable quest content. The system's at war and what we aim to do with act one of *The New War*, which is what we showed at Tenno Con, just shows the system's perspective on the war, and then it will immediately become a personal story."

For those invested in its twists and turns (the quests preceding *The New War* left players with a lot of personal stakes) this new campaign is set to be an emotional chapter. "I think the story is going to leave people emotional... I didn't finish the script without crying. It's a very personal work for us."

NEWBIES WAR

This sounds all good for those already enthralled but what about those who've never even tried *Warframe*? Well, it might just be the best time there's been yet to jump aboard, as Digital Extremes has released a new onboarding update. "The goal of that is to make people's journey from the starting the game to getting to *The New War* way less grindy." Though it's no simple thing to rebalance the game's early portion, some aspects weren't so difficult to implement. "Luckily there's a couple of really easy ways to do it by just reducing the resources required... it's very much a de-grind."

All of which is a testament to Digital Extremes care for its community, a responsibility it takes great care with, but one that isn't always easy, especially during a global pandemic where your game suddenly becomes a lifeline for portions of your audience. "It's been surreal. I myself have picked a game and made it my digital therapist for coping with lockdown. I know *Warframe* has become that for a lot of people. Which comes with its own series of issues to engage around, because no one's really happy, right now, and we're just trying to do our best to not add to the unhappiness." So what's the best approach? "We're just trying to exercise caution with everything we do to not make people's days worse by doing something in *Warframe* that is a net negative. Sometimes that's a nerf, right? I'm not saying the design philosophy is not to nerf

during lockdown because people are depressed but it's not a mutually exclusive concept. You need to be aware of how the player base are invested in the world you've built and for us that's come with its challenges because we've had a couple of misfires over the course of the pandemic wherein we released a pretty buggy update, or maybe we nerfed something, but we've just taken an approach where we're trying to over-communicate the truth with all our decisions to alleviate any misunderstandings."

ALL LIFT TOGETHER

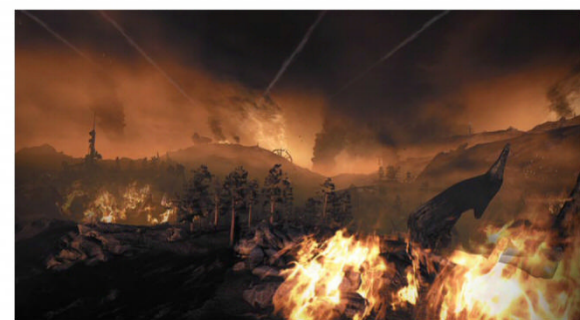
The New War's arrival represents more than a new story to tell. It's the fruit of a very tough couple of years for the team. "We've only really gotten together once this year and that was for Tenno-con, for the developer stream crew all included. So when it comes to work, that was it, and we're now all remote again. I wish we were together because I think it would change the... sense that we're actually doing this, this is the year, this is the time. But we're making it work remote. There are more challenges remote, that is baseline truth, but we're doing what we can to get around those challenges."

For Rebecca *The New War* is more than just the next update. "This quest is like... the *Half Life 3* of *Warframe*, you know? Because we've been talking about it for so long and it's finally here. I'm so proud we got to this point despite all the hardships... I hope people think it's worth the wait. More than anything I hope people realise the next year of *Warframe* is all about what happens after *The New War*."

So what is coming in *Warframe*'s future? What of the elusive Duviri Paradox, teased back in 2019? "It was the weirdest thing we've ever shown. Fans should wait to hear from us on when to set their expectations accordingly. The truth is, now we're about to release *The New War*, our next update will be that. There are some interesting things going on, I'm not going to say it's directly connected because *The New War* is its own thing but one or two players already saw some connections in the trailer at Tennocon. There was a very interesting horse in one of our Tennocon videos... This world is always connected."

You can find those connections yourself, and maybe you'll even get a few tears in your eyes, when *The New War* releases later this month.

Samantha Greer



You'll get to command your little robot army as one of the Corpus.

IT MIGHT JUST BE THE BEST TIME THERE'S BEEN YET TO JUMP ABOARD WARFRAME

Warframe: The New War



ABOVE: You'll also take control of Teshin, who's still more mystery than man.

LEFT: Warframe has never been bigger or grander.

PREVIEW

Weird West

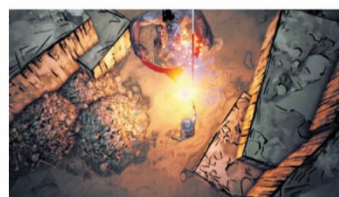


ABOVE: You'll choose between five characters whose stories intertwine.

RIGHT: Enemies carry a range of loot that'll help you on your mission.

FAR RIGHT: You can find and hire crewmates to help you in battles.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Jan 11, 2022

DEVELOPER
WolfEye Studios

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
weirdwest.com

WEIRD WEST

An immersive sim that blends chaotic combat and horror

One grisly stop on a trek through the first of five chapters in *Weird West* will remind you of what was so scarce in its most recent contemporary, *Deathloop*. Both are immersive sims with vastly different goals. *Deathloop* was about harnessing an unwieldy system, but *Weird West* is about living in it.

Early in *Weird West*, I came across a coven ritual. The witches asked me to leave them alone, but before I could walk away, their ritual succeeded. A horde of undead and their ghastly leader poured out of the summoning circle. The sisters were armed for it. They took care of the abominations like it was a Monday. I just watched.

This event, like some others I experienced in a preview version of *Weird West*'s first act, unfolded without any input from me. This year's big immersive sim, *Deathloop*, also features inhabitants who go about their days without you, but little consequence happens without your intervention. You rarely get to stand back and watch everything play out.

IMMERSIVE GRIM

Raphaël Colantonio, *Weird West*'s creative director, previously led Arkane's admirable effort to keep the immersive sim genre alive with *Dishonored* and *Prey*. In 2017, Colantonio left the studio he founded, and in 2019 he formed a new studio called WolfEye. Arkane went on to release *Deathloop*, a modernised take on the genre, whereas WolfEye's *Weird West*

travels back in time and plucks from classic RPGs like *Fallout*.

Like *Deathloop*, *Weird West* is about finding your own way through environments designed first and foremost to obey physical laws: bullets ignite barrels, heavy rain puts out fires, and the elements at your disposal are often at the enemies' as well. Like *Deathloop*'s island, the setting is a playground for the absurd, a smear of the American West with devils in the seams. Beyond that, the two games diverge significantly.

As I led my veteran bounty hunter through *Weird West*'s tangled world via a bird's-eye perspective, I spent a lot of time speaking with the people, something that happens rarely in *Deathloop*. It's also the first game I've played set in this time period that features a number of Black and Asian characters, although it's unclear to me at this point if *Weird West* plans to grapple with America's westward expansion from those perspectives or the native perspective, which are often erased in western fiction, or if the supernatural will take centre stage.

The first character, a bounty hunter in search of her husband, is equipped with a series of lethal and silent skills but is very weak. Enemies carrying shotguns wiped me out in a few hits. I was forced to take cover, roll and carefully aim, but every bullet felt like a dice roll. Stealth is an option too, but the density of enemy patrols made it hard for me to stay undetected. And when the caves coughed up monsters, the sturdy crates I was hiding behind couldn't save me.

That's why *Weird West* works, at least in the early hours I previewed. Despite having considerable influence over the scenarios you can find yourself in, the world is against you. To make it through, you'll need a bit of luck. While not as clever as *Deathloop*'s time loop premise, it means there's almost no repetition robbing it of spontaneity.

Weird West reassured me that the immersive sim is still playful, still sharp, and open for interpretation by developers who want to push it further. If what I played is close to what the final game will be in early 2022, I'll be thrilled to step into its clockwork world and make some spectacular mistakes.

Tyler Colp

PLAYED
IT

I WAS FORCED TO TAKE COVER, ROLL AND AIM, BUT EVERY BULLET FELT LIKE A DICE ROLL



Men of War II

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
Best WayPUBLISHER
1C EntertainmentLINK
1cpublishing.eu

MEN OF WAR II

The return of the men who love war, and their tanks

Videogames are pretty invested in continuing and replaying World War II. There was a period where it seemed like people were getting a bit tired of the old confrontation between Allies and Axis, but it was short lived. Hot on the heels of *Company of Heroes*' reappearance and *Call of Duty* heading back to its favourite war, we've also got returning RTS *Men of War II*. It's a good time to be a lover of old tanks.

These tanks were very much the stars of the first hands-off demo and presentation from publisher 1C Entertainment and *Men of War*'s original developer, Best Way, once again at the helm. In the clips of campaign missions and PvP confrontations, I almost felt bad for the wee digital soldiers getting mown down by these indomitable vehicles.

HEAVY METAL

Men of War II's tanks seem unstoppable, with the heavier ones able to do a huge amount of damage even on their lonesome. They aren't really unstoppable, of course. Some well-positioned anti-tank guns, or sneaky infantry keeping out of sight, can take these monsters out. Whether you're commanding or fighting them, you'll want to pay attention to things like armour thickness and the piercing power of shells. Thankfully, all this stuff is displayed clearly, helping you get a read on the damage you're doing and taking.

Modular damage means there's more than just two states. Vehicles can be immobilised, turrets can be taken out,

gunners can be killed – there are plenty of ways to slow down an enemy's advance, leaving them vulnerable.

With the series' Direct Control feature, you get to effectively sit inside the tank, controlling it like you might a first-person shooter. All vehicles and troops can be commanded this way, though some will be third-person. Some tanks can be camouflaged, too, and in one clip I saw a Tiger disguised as a bush devastating a convoy before it could even figure out where the attack was coming from.

Of course, all of *Men of War II*'s units require an on-the-ball commander to take advantage of their tricks. It looks like there will be a fair amount of micromanagement as you select different types of ammunition to deal with different kinds of enemies, and you'll need to make sure they're fully stocked back in your territory.

LINE OF FIRE

Speaking of territory, *Men of War 2* has a dynamic front line that divides maps into enemy and ally areas, limiting what you can do. Troops can only appear a certain distance from the front line; engineers have to be in your own territory to erect defences; vehicles have to retreat into your territory to resupply; and enemy territory will be hidden by a fog of war, unlike your own.

Alongside the twin campaigns are co-op and PvP modes. In co-op, you can play specific missions or entire campaigns in a five-person team, while the PvP mode will be a 5v5 affair with players picking a preset battalion from a list of 45 – 15 each for the Allied, Axis, and Soviet forces. Each battalion has a specific playstyle, with units that represent the different phases of battle. In the case of tanks, that means you'll have light tanks to start with, and then you'll want to bring in things like the King Tiger when you reach the endgame.

If you need a break from World War II, then modders might have your back. With full mod support and a toolset provided by Best Way, modders will be able to make sci-fi scenarios, or ones that go further back in history. Amid *Men of War: Assault Squad 2*'s mods, for instance, are *Fallout* and *Warhammer* adaptations, so we should be able to expect the same kind of thing after *Men of War 2* arrives in 2022.

Fraser Brown



Just taking a break to admire the planes.



The close-up detail is incredibly impressive.

IN ONE CLIP I SAW A TIGER DISGUISED AS A BUSH DEVASTATING A CONVOY



FAR LEFT: Some pals hunting nature's most elusive beast: tanks.

LEFT: Pretty sure that convoy won't be around for much longer.

Sacred Fire



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Poetic

PUBLISHER
Iceberg Interactive

LINK
sacredfiregame.com

SACRED FIRE

Your worst enemy is your own mind in this psychological RPG

What's Geralt's mindset when he's cutting a group of bandits down to size? What does Shepard *really* think about the Normandy crew? These are not questions I've thought to ponder, but *Sacred Fire* makes them its *raison d'être*, opening the hero's skull to have a good rummage inside their brain.

Set vaguely in ancient Scotland, the plot (as it is now) sees you trying to warn your village about a Roman incursion. You then make for the hills, either for a rescue mission, or while blowing it off. It took me about two hours to reach the end of act 1 on my first playthrough (there are three acts planned for the finished game), by which point I'd been presented with roughly twenty gazillion choices.

The village bully tries to rob you. What do you do? If it comes to violence, how do you handle it – step by step. There are a ton of micro decisions to resolve during each event: a mixture of dialogue, introspection, action sequences, and combat.

Essentially, *Sacred Fire* is a visual novel, but where your every choice is accompanied by a bevy of stats, which are pleasingly illustrated on screen with swish typographical effects. You need to manage your anger and fear, which can both reduce the percentage chance of many choices. But you can increase the odds by spending MP (Motivation Points). Failed decisions can usually be reattempted a couple of times, undermining them somewhat, but I

PLAYED IT

THE PLOT SEES YOU TRYING TO WARN YOUR VILLAGE ABOUT A ROMAN INCURSION

suppose the RNG could get annoying if that weren't the case.

HEAD GAMES

Each event is treated like a battle, whether it's a literal fight against a group of Romans, or a heated exchange with the village healer. You respond by picking your actions and words carefully, but also by taking a moment to assess the situation, reflecting on your history with and thoughts on the people around you. It's a fairly in-depth system, *too* in-depth sometimes, turning what could be simple conversations into drawn-out psychological evaluations.

I shaped my first character into an idealistic and community-focused villager, and my second into a loner still haunted by her traumatic youth. The protagonist's background is fixed, but you can change how they feel about it, reducing trauma points as they deal with it, or inflicting guilt points on the brother who you feel didn't have your back. While the story is linear and seems to reach the same conclusions regardless of what you do, it will divert slightly depending on your choices – for example, whether you take the time to search for a missing girl.

On my second playthrough, I decided not to save Raven, which simply skipped a huge chunk of act 1. She appeared briefly by my side in a later scene – as if I had saved her – so there's work to do pruning the story branches.

I need to mention the artwork, as it's fascinatingly strange, comprised of static 3D models sat atop environmental backgrounds. There's a great level of detail to the faces, but no expression, even during fight scenes. It's as if a bunch of mannequins have been dressed up to perform a play. Knock a character down in combat, and their static artwork will merely be tilted sideways. It's one of the funniest things I've seen in a game in ages.

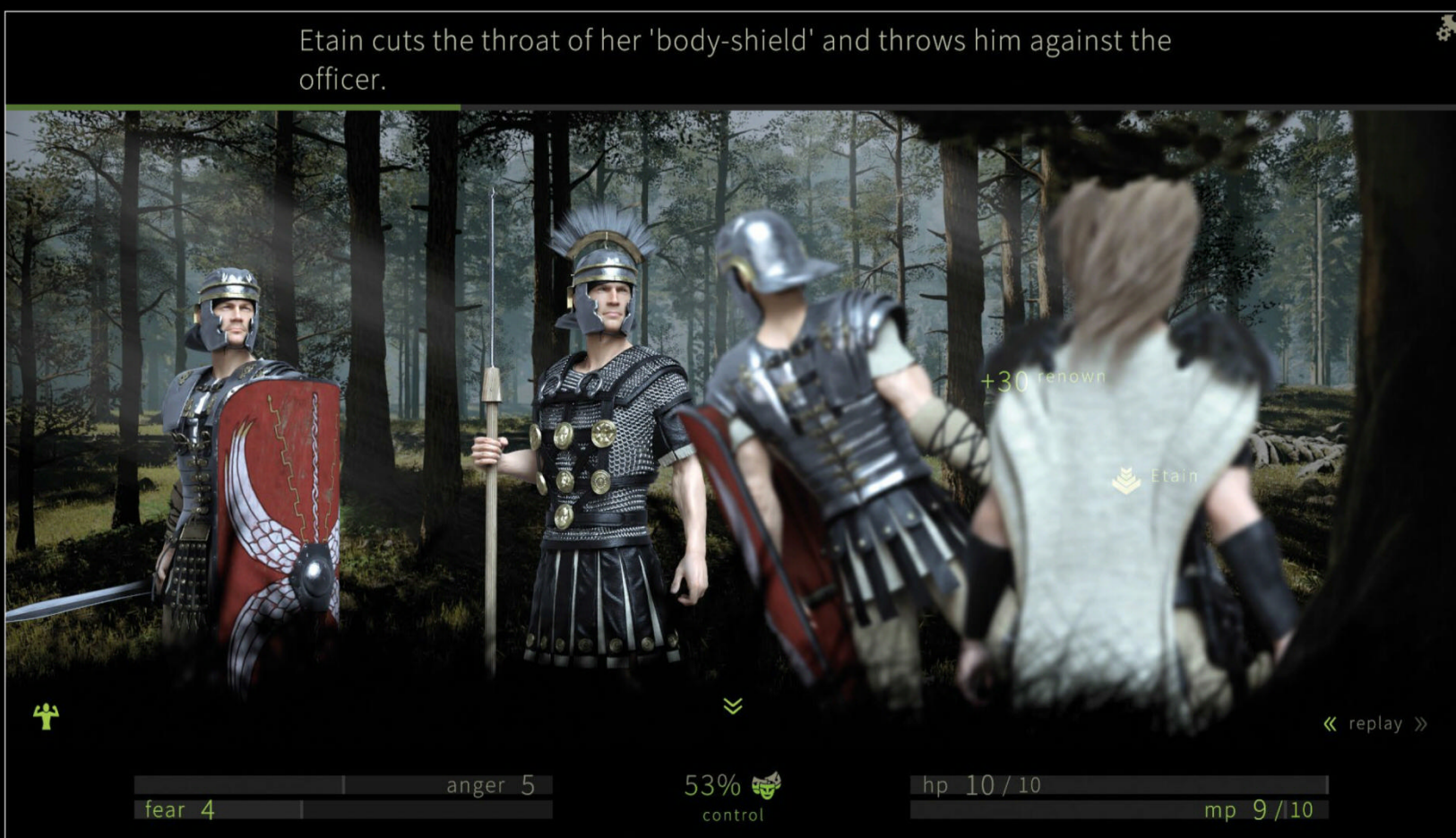
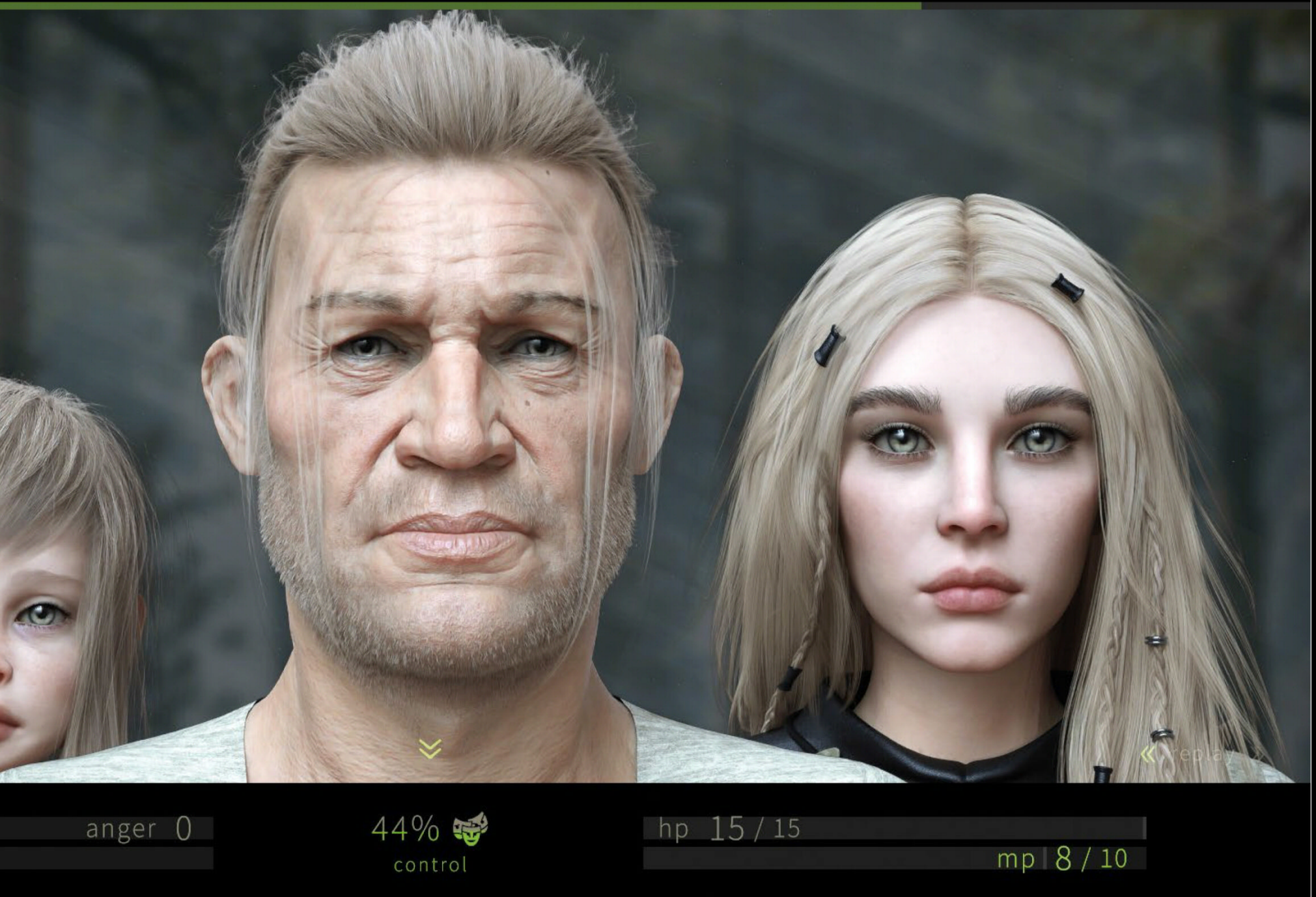
Ultimately, the character models weren't *too* distracting and undermining when I got stuck into the in-depth character development, which is the best part of the Early Access build as it stands. The story isn't anything to shout about yet, but I enjoyed the nuts and bolts of the statistical decision-making. Hopefully, my choices will pay off in the rest of the story.

Tom Sykes



Etain's mysterious backstory is left tantalisingly unfinished.

s custom dictates, the hunter shares the meat with others.



ABOVE: The faces can be impressive, but the children look quite odd.

LEFT: Characters gain renown points as they perform impressive deeds.

The Monster Within



ABOVE: Optional 'afflictions' help or hinder, with a health cost.

RIGHT: Each monster plays very differently.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
GMO Free Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/3ksD3pi

THE MONSTER WITHIN

Meet your new beast friends

There's no shortage of card battlers on Steam, but none of the others are quite like this. For example, get a load of that gorgeous, Lichtenstein-style retro art spread across the page. Isn't it fantastic? Gameplay needs to work hard to keep up; and, somehow, it just about does.

The basic concept would, interestingly, be a good fit for several genres. Each character is a monster disguised as a human. The more damage they take, the more their true monster form is revealed. The more monstrous they become, the greater the difference in the abilities available to them.

How this translates to play isn't explained fully in-game (for now at least), but it's easy enough to fill in the gaps. At the beginning of each round, you have a few cards that deal a little damage, and the rest are played to earn resources, which you must 'spend' on new cards before the end of your turn. Resources don't carry over to the next turn, but a card isn't lost when you play it. All of your cards are cycled through your discard and draw piles until the end of the round... with one important twist.

As you take damage and start to look more icky, the types of card that you hold and have available to buy change. Initially, the resource and card type is Day. As you take a virtual beating, the Day cards begin to be swapped out for Night and Monster cards. These are the

ones with themes and abilities that often lean into the details of your current monster. The mad scientist for example can create potions used for an instant resource, attack, or defence boost, while the blob can build up a growth stat that can, with certain cards, be translated into damage or healing.

FANGS VERY MUCH

The fact that you're not only playing as a monster, but also *against* (an AI) one, is where much of the strategy comes from. Reduce an opponent's health to zero, forcing them to embrace their true form, and the fight continues against this new, more powerful version of themselves with a new health bar. Though it's worth pointing out that when you reach zero health, you just hit game over (an odd decision, but one that prevents the game from being too easy).

Several losses in, I eventually learned to think ahead when buying cards in the early stages of a round. The wraith for instance sometimes employs an ability making it immune to all but Day cards, so I stock up on as many of those as I can while they're still available. The vampire can become incredibly difficult to take down if you don't do it quickly, thanks to her regular use of healing and debuffs, so I try to plan accordingly.

The Early Access status is mostly visible in terms of the amount of content. There are already hundreds of cards, which makes each round pleasantly unpredictable, and there are temporary mutators and card buffs to be had. Each run consists of just three rounds though, and can usually be beaten in half an hour or less. Six of the ten monsters are currently available, the vampire your starting character and the other five waiting to be unlocked.

One issue is that some major current and planned content is locked behind a requirement to finish a run on one of the highest difficulties. This carries a danger of casual players losing interest sooner rather than later. That would be a real shame, as this is a unique and enormously fun game – one I'll keep playing – that deserves as large a community as possible.

Luke Kemp

THE MORE DAMAGE THEY TAKE, THE MORE THEIR TRUE MONSTER FORM IS REVEALED



COVER FEATURE

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl

ZONE

New mutants, a new faction, and new ways to die in **STALKER 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL**.

By Chris Livingston



The Zone of the *STALKER* series is filled with radiation and dread in equal measures. Home to mutant horrors, hostile factions, and otherworldly anomalies, the Zone only promises one thing: a quick and brutal death. The original *STALKER* games were bleak, terrifying, unforgiving survival sandboxes. The Zone is the most miserable place in videogame history. We can't wait to go back.

We have, however, waited for *quite* a while. It's been over a decade since the release of the last *STALKER* game by GSC Gameworld, *Call of Prip'yat*, and *STALKER 2* (oddly enough, it's the fourth game in the series) was originally planned for 2012. It was cancelled that same year, only to reappear in development again in 2018, this time in the Unreal Engine. Aiming for a release in April of 2022, we're finally getting tantalisingly close to another visit to the Zone. And the wait may have been worth it, as it sounds like something closer to the vision GSC Gameworld had for its first *STALKER* game, *Shadow of Chernobyl*, way back in 2007.

"The *STALKER* series always aimed to be set in a seamless open world, but only now is it possible to implement it as planned," says game director Evgeniy Grygorovych. "*STALKER 2* features a vast world to explore with different biomes,

numerous locations, labs, and undergrounds to explore. It's 64 square kilometres, and it's all yours. You can go anywhere."

DEATH AND REBIRTH

Time hasn't just passed for us while we waited for the next *STALKER* game. Time has passed in the Zone, too. Years have gone by since the events of *STALKER: Call of Prip'yat*, and that passage of time is evident in the look of *STALKER 2*.

"In terms of art direction and general feel, that means more modern vibes have been added to the atmosphere of decay and devastation," says Grygorovych. "At the same time, locations and environments have become even more obsolete and abandoned, as a significant time has passed in this frozen world. This is why the contrast between technology and abandonment feels even stronger."

That's also why you might be skulking cautiously through the world and suddenly stumble upon a field covered in bright red poppy plants, which provides a shocking burst of colour in the normally grey and gloomy Zone. Green grass, leafy trees, and ruined buildings covered in moss show nature flourishing in some areas, despite all the deadly radiation and decay. At the same time, other locations have plunged further into ruin. As seen in the trailer, a guard tower from the second game in the trilogy, *STALKER: Clear Sky*, can be visited in *STALKER 2*, but the tower is now barely standing, leaning crookedly and held up by



COVER FEATURE

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl



» cables as if it's about to crumble into a pile of twisted and rusty metal.

But flourishing flora and decaying buildings aren't the only thing that's changed over the years. The Zone is home to new inhabitants, both human and otherwise.

OH, DEER

You can expect to meet many of the Zone's familiar residents in *STALKER 2*. As we saw in the E3 trailer, the fast-moving, nearly silent, often invisible Bloodsuckers are back (unfortunately, because they're scary as hell) and you can expect to run into the hooded, dwarf-like Burers again, too, still ready to yank weapons out of your hands and unleash deadly shockwaves with their telekinetic powers. But *STALKER 2* will also feature new mutants and monsters, and even something that initially sounds harmless may wind up being a very grave threat.

Typically in open world survival games, deer are a combination of a bit of pleasant scenery (aw, a deer!) and a resource (yum, a deer!). In most games these gentle creatures are to be admired at a distance or hunted for meat, leather, and other crafting resources. Even in a radioactive wasteland, you wouldn't expect a deer, even an irradiated, mutated deer, to be anything more than a harmless feast.

But this is the world of *STALKER* we're talking about. Mutant deer in *STALKER 2* are nothing to sneeze at. In fact, it sounds like you might want to avoid them altogether. First, the deer look absolutely badass, with glowing eyes set below a massive cluster of jagged antlers. If you were thinking of walking away from your hunting excursion with a cosy warm deer fur pelt, you can probably forget it: most of the deer's fur has fallen out, leaving only a few tufts growing between hard armoured plating of what might be mutated bone that's protruding through the animal's hide. This deer looks mean and not even remotely tasty, and its armoured frame means a simple shot isn't going to take it down – you'll need to find a weak spot somewhere on its body if you want to kill it. And it's not just going to be standing there gently nibbling grass while you shoot: the deer can attack with its sharp hooves – both back and front – and that chaotic crown of jagged horns.

But that's only part of the problem. *STALKER 2*'s deer hasn't just mutated physically, but mentally. Yes, this is a *psychic* deer, and not only can it launch physical and psy-attacks at you, it can summon other medium-sized mutants nearby for help, meaning targeting a single deer can lead to a swarm of other nasty creatures. Don't worry, it gets

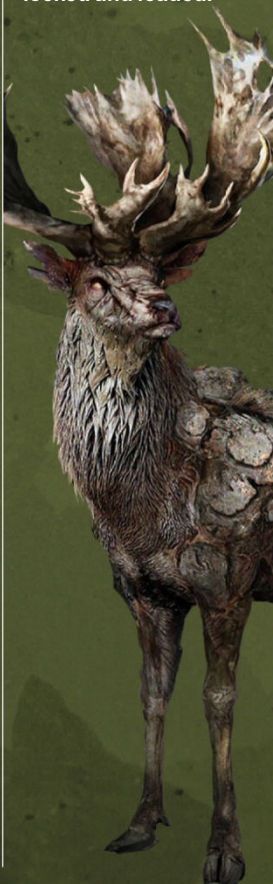
even worse. The single deer you were foolhardy enough to shoot at now appears to be many deer, because this irradiated deer can create illusory copies of itself. Now not only are you fighting a potential mob of helper mutants, you're also trying to figure out which of the several deer you're looking at is the real one and which are simply illusions. Like I said, you might want to avoid the deer of *STALKER 2* altogether.

ANOMALOUS MATERIALS

Of course, the whole reason you're going into the Zone and braving encounters with psychic armoured deer in the first place is to hunt for artefacts. Artefacts are rare, valuable, and often dangerous items that have gained unusual properties due to the anomalies of the Zone. If you've been in the Zone before, you're no stranger to anomalies, but familiarity might not help as much as you think.

"Anomalies work in much the same way as before, but have become more dangerous and more varied," says Grygorovych.

ABOVE: Irradiated dogs hunt in packs, so make sure you're locked and loaded.



Parts of the Zone almost seem idyllic now that nature is reclaiming them.



**ITS ARMoured FRAME MEANS
A SIMPLE SHOT ISN'T GOING
TO TAKE IT DOWN**

Anomalies are extremely dangerous, often fatal phenomena that occur in the Zone. And a lot of times they occur before you're even aware you've stepped into one. They come in many different forms: sometimes they're explosive, fiery events that will flash-fry you where you stand, or gravitational vortexes that will pick you up and spin you around as if you've been caught in a tornado. There can be singular anomalies, they can be clustered together in anomaly fields, and there are new 'arch anomalies', such as the Fire Whirlwind, which represent an even deadlier type of threat.

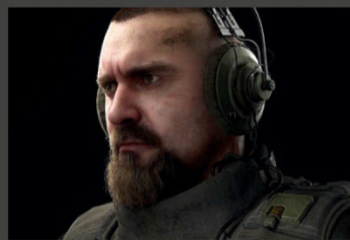
Special detectors can help you spot the anomalies and point you to the precious artefacts within them, but they're no guarantee you'll escape in one piece or with the item you were searching for. And some tricks for dealing with anomalies from the previous *STALKER* games might not be viable strategies, such as one we probably all did at one time or another – suddenly realising an anomaly is about to go critical

and just running like hell. Dashing through an anomaly field might save your life, but it's not going to be a long-term solution. Even if you survive, your equipment may be heavily damaged or even destroyed. As Grygorovych bluntly puts it, "Your armour will turn to dust" after a few sprints through an anomaly field. With good quality equipment so hard to come by in the game, it'll cost you dearly if you try to take a shortcut through an anomaly field too many times.

As for the arch anomalies like the Fire Whirlwind, GSC isn't telling us much about them yet, other than that simply making your way through them using detectors won't be enough to come away with your prize. "The temperature is too high and the artefact from the centre cannot be retrieved," says Grygorovych of the Fire Whirlwind. "We don't want to spoil the solution, but there is a way to fetch the artefact." I'm guessing it involves something more durable than some sort of fancy oven mitt.

PICKING SIDES

STALKER's factions have different goals and ideologies. Who will you side with?



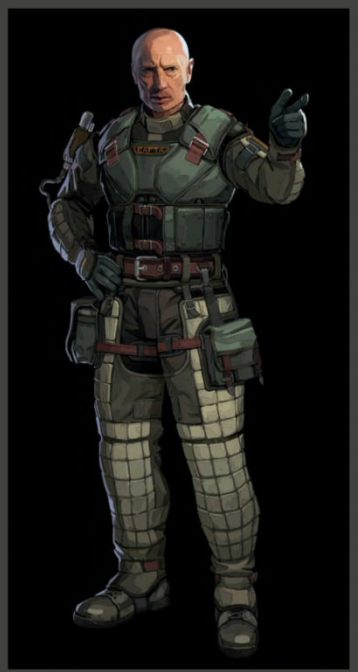
FREEDOM

Members of Freedom think the Zone's secrets should be shared with the world, not kept by the state.



MONOLITH

The religious cult of Monolith are back, determined to kill anyone trying to reach the centre of the Zone.



WARD

Led by Colonel Korshunov, this new faction acts like the policemen of the Zone. Bandits hate them. Will you?

DUTY SEES THE ZONE AS A HAZARD TO HUMANITY AND FIGHTS TO ERADICATE IT



» IT'S THE FUZZ!

Along with new mutants, a powerful and feared new faction has risen in the years you've been away from the Zone. This new faction was hinted at in the E3 trailer, as eagle-eyed viewers spotted graffiti on a wall written in Ukrainian, which included the word 'guard'.

This new faction is called the Ward. Put it this way: if the Zone is the Wild West and bandits are outlaws and bank robbers, the Ward are the lawmen. They may not have tin stars pinned to their chests, but they're definitely seen as police by the rest of the Zone.

The leader of the Ward is Colonel Alexander Korshunov, an accomplished and experienced soldier who personally recruited the faction's members from groups of highly trained mercenaries and turned them into a proper army. A disciplined leader, he doesn't tolerate disloyalty from his soldiers, and crossing him is a bad idea.

The Ward sounds a bit similar to Duty, another paramilitary faction

ABOVE: Even in the deadly Zone there are a few safe places to visit.

from earlier *STALKER* games, but Duty sees the Zone as a hazard to humanity and fights to eradicate it. The Ward, on the other hand, wants to control the dangers of the Zone so they may serve humankind through the scientific knowledge gained from them. As a result, the Ward's goal is to protect the important discoveries taking place at the Scientific Institute for Research of the

Chernobyl Anomalous Area. They don't look kindly on bandits, and the feeling is mutual.

Choosing to side with Colonel Korshunov and the Ward, or the leader and members of any of *STALKER 2*'s factions, will be an important and difficult choice for players, according to Grygorovych. "Several characters of conflicting ideologies can be found even within

CLUB DREAD

Love STALKER's bleak and hopeless atmosphere? Sure, we all do! Here are other games that capture a similar feeling



METRO 2033

It's linear, not open world, but *Metro 2033* captures the same dread and horror as the *STALKER* series.



SURVARIUM

Deadly anomalies and FPS combat in a postapocalyptic landscape. Like *STALKER*, but multiplayer only.



ESCAPE FROM TARKOV

Brutal combat and survival elements fill this shooter as players try to escape with valuable loot.



CHERNOBYLITE

Hell, it's a non-linear survival shooter that takes place in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and features Stalkers.

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl

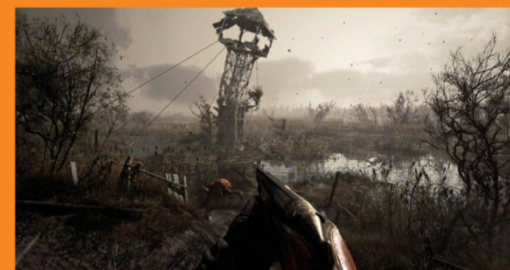


the same faction,” he says. “Even within the [GSC Gameworld], I see people argue about the choices [their coworkers] have made.”

SURVIVAL KIT

As always, survival is a challenge and that’s not just due to monsters, mutants, and roaming bandits. While most of *STALKER 2*’s survival systems will sound familiar, such as using bandages to stop bleeding, meds to recover lost health, and different types of protective clothing or armour to avoid lethal doses of radiation, there are a few new survival elements sprinkled in that will make keeping yourself alive even more difficult, even when you’re not being shot at, blown up, or stalked by psychic deer.

As always, you’ll need to keep yourself well-fed, but going without eating for too long will do more than simply lower your hit points. There will be secondary effects of hunger, which include more difficulty aiming your weapons and a loss of stamina. Your stomach may even



begin to audibly rumble if you’ve skipped too many meals. With a full belly, on the other hand, you’ll be able to move faster and cover long distances more quickly.

And sleep will play a big role in maintaining your health and effectiveness in the Zone. If a *STALKER* goes more than a full day without sleep, they’ll begin to feel the effects of that fatigue, and the longer they continue pushing themselves without rest the more severe those effects will become. The *STALKER*’s vision will be affected, they’ll lose stamina, and they may even begin experiencing auditory hallucinations. There are already plenty of creepy, disturbing and horrifying sounds in the Zone: you definitely don’t want to be adding to them by not getting enough sack time.

There are, naturally, short-term solutions for dealing with the negative effects of hunger or lack of sleep. “Any debuff can be overcome with an item for a short time period,” says Grygorovych. “For example, the negative effects from the [sleep-deprived] condition can be temporarily removed by having an energy drink. But if you do not satisfy the needs of your character, the sum of all those needs significantly complicates the gameplay.” You can put off things like rest and meals for a while, in other

words – and seeing as how the Zone isn’t a great place to take a nap, you’ll probably have to. But it’ll all catch up with you eventually.

FRIENDZONED

Grygorovych expects players to be able to spend 100 hours to see everything *STALKER 2* has to offer, which includes an intricate plot and non-linear storyline. And with different choices to make, such as which faction to side with, he says it’s “impossible” to see everything in a single playthrough. “We have 30 narrative designers working specifically on plot and quests,” says Grygorovych. “Creating a non-linear story is the most difficult challenge in games and we consider the plot to be one of the main features of the game. We are really proud of how it’s shaping up.”

There will also be multiplayer elements like PvP, deathmatch, and team deathmatch added after launch. If you were hoping to take on the Zone with a friend at your side, however, that’s not in the cards. When it comes to *STALKER 2*, co-op is a non-starter. “It is impossible to add a co-op mode without ruining the experience of overcoming the difficulties on your own,”

Grygorovych says. When it comes to surviving the Zone, you’ll have to do it solo, *STALKER*. ■

The underground of Agroprom is the last place you want to run into someone. Or something.



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**Celebrating the absolute
best of the last 12
months of PC gaming**

PERSONAL PICK



Robin Valentine

DORFROMANTIK

This year I was really looking for videogames to be my calm, chill escape from an increasingly weird and stressful reality. So you can understand why I fell so in love with this gentle puzzle game about building idyllic little countryside towns, one tile at a time. I'm terrible at actually scoring points, but I'm always completing the true objective: creating a place I'd love to go on holiday.



PERSONAL PICK



Wesley Fenlon

CRUELTY SQUAD

Surely the result of a food poisoning fever dream, *Cruelty Squad* also gleefully aims to depict what rancid sushi does to your body as a first-person shooter. Playing *Cruelty Squad* is bathing in wall-to-wall puke textures and embracing the filthiness of a hypercapitalist existence where you sell body parts on the stock exchange and use your own intestines as a grappling hook. The open-ended missions are a genuine treat to puzzle out.



PC GAMER
**BEST
ONGOING**
2021

APEX LEGENDS

Nat Clayton, features producer: *Apex Legends* has always been good. But for those first few years it felt like Respawn was still figuring out how to run an ongoing battle royale. But in 2021 the studio nailed it. Season 9 is the clear standout, bringing us not only a strong new character in Valkyrie, but a new Arenas game mode – a distinctly Respawn take on *Counter-Strike* that lets you immediately get into a fair fight. Arenas proved that *Apex* has legs beyond battle royale, cementing the game as not just a good BR, but one of the best team shooters around.

But it also feels like *Apex* is just so much more confident this year, both as a game and as a world. Respawn's storytelling has gone into overdrive, bringing in community artists, and animators to help flesh out the world, while leaning fully into voice lines and BR downtime to bring the game's cast to life. *Apex* is a soap opera now, and every new season escalates the drama between our sci-fi buds.

The game's latest season, Escape, has only reinvigorated my excitement for the game after a somewhat lacklustre tenth season. Like Olympus, Storm Point is a gorgeous reimaging of what an

Apex map can look like, and Ash is a strong initiator who managed to be more than mere *Titanfall 2* nostalgia. But at the end of the day, *Apex* is still the best and only shooter for punting yourself down a hill at 400mph as a floating Scottish lass. What more could you ever ask for?

Phil Savage, UK editor-in-chief: There's a lot of personality in *Apex*'s maps, and – as each gets tweaked and upgraded over its seasons and through Town Takeover events – plenty of history too. King's Canyon has covered its vast empty spaces with new attractions, and World's Edge is breaking apart at the seams. Despite this, each new map manages to bring its own personality. The most recent,

Storm Point, feels like a strong reaction to earlier maps, with more clearly defined routes that funnel players into conflict in interesting ways.

The strength of *Apex*'s third year is that there's always something new to learn. But the enduring appeal of *Apex* as a whole is that it's built on such an enjoyable foundation. Try sliding into a teamfight, SMGs blazing, and tell me any other battle royale is worth your time. ■

EACH NEW MAP MANAGES TO BRING ITS OWN PERSONALITY





PC GAMER
**BEST
CO-OP**
2021

BACK 4 BLOOD

★ **Evan Lahti, global editor-in-chief:** Before it released, we were concerned that adding aim-down-sights to the *Left 4 Dead* formula would slow it down too much. But *Back 4 Blood*'s guns are silky in your hands, containing nuance that exceeds their appearance.

As an FPS fan I love the attention to detail: the hip fire animation changes when you drop to a crouch, communicating clearly that you're more accurate than standing, but less accurate than if you were in ironsights. Range matters. You can kit out a horde killer by grabbing attachments and card bonuses that increase bullet penetration.

The high volume of enemies and the fact that so many guns are one-hit kills against basic undead feels great. Lately I'm lugging around the .50 calibre sniper rifle as an anti-'big guy' gun, with the silenced Magnum as a sidearm.

Morgan Park, staff writer: Were I still on my first playthrough of *Back 4 Blood*, I would've thought Evan silly for carrying the big sniper rifle that shoots slow. But now that I'm jumping

back into the campaign on a higher difficulty, having a marksman for the nastier infected hordes is not only smart, but necessary. I think that speaks to *Back 4 Blood*'s strengths over *Left 4 Dead*: the game pushes you to try new things, and it's not only replayable because shooting zombies is fun. There's always a new deck to test out, a gun you've not given a proper try yet, or a nasty combo of Corruption Cards that puts a twist on a mission you've done before. It's *Left 4 Dead*, but more, and often better.

Jacob Ridley, senior hardware editor: I've never had as much fun benchmarking a game as I did in *Back 4 Blood*, and that was in the company of the game's confused bots. Seriously, I ran the same level maybe 30 times, and I genuinely enjoyed every run. If you have a cheery bunch of zombie-annihilating hobbyists to play with, there's a lot of replayability in this game. The cards system makes each level feel a little different to the last, and with buffs, for both player and zombie, you'll find you end up with a different playstyle nearly every run. ■

PC GAMER
**BEST
MULTIPLAYER**
2021

CHIVALRY 2

★ **Morgan Park:** In a world of multiplayer games that are either ultra competitive or glorified checklists, *Chivalry 2* is a rare game that just wants you to hop into a match and go effin wild. Objectives are little more than set dressing for the game's impressively massive 64-player battles. You can push the battering ram toward the castle with your team, but no one will begrudge you for ignoring it and going on kicking spree instead. One time I decided I'm allergic to swords and was only allowed to kill people with dismembered arms and heads (it went surprisingly well).

Evan Lahti: If you've ever practiced a martial art, you know how crucial it is to manage and manipulate distance to beat an opponent. *Chivalry 2* manages to contain this aspect of authenticity without going all-in on fussy medieval realism. It feels unbelievably good to survive a 3v1 by dodging at the right time, or forcing enemies to wallop one another with unexpected footwork.

This is a rare competitive multiplayer game that understands the value of being messy. Sometimes a catapult shot drops out of the sky and insta-kills me and five of my teammates. Over-enthusiastic teammates will hit you in the back of the head with their falchion. Archers are an absolute nuisance, cowardly arrow-lobbers who can kill with impunity. But *Chivalry 2* embraces these warped aspects as charming texture. There's a dedicated button for letting everyone around you know that you want to 'Kill the archers'. I press it often.

Tyler Wilde, executive editor: I love how *Chivalry 2* balances negativity with positivity. When you die, you can tap a key to commend the knight who decapitated you, if they deserve it. A couple of times I looked for that key in *Battlefield 2042* and was disappointed not to find it. And like Evan says, the combat is subtler than it can look. You've got to use footwork to find openings, and find a rhythm without being predictable. It's a bit like boxing. But with swords. ■





WILDERMYTH

★ **Robin Valentine, print editor:** I don't think any videogame has ever more successfully evoked the feel of a tabletop RPG. A few hours in *Wildermyth* is like a supercut of a fantastic year-long Dungeons & Dragons campaign. With the procedural systems as your dungeon master, you follow the lives and adventures of entire parties of heroes, each organically growing and developing in all sorts of unexpected directions. And they really are unexpected – while it's perfectly possible for a warrior to just find a magic sword and kill a dragon with it, it's equally likely they'll be cursed to slowly transform into living crystal, or make a pact with an ancient tree, or upset a witch who turns their head into a raven's.

They even age, and fall in love, and have children; eventually they'll retire, if they survive the adventurer's life. They're never really gone, though – your favourites become legacy heroes who can return rejuvenated in subsequent campaigns, like pulling out your favourite old character sheet for yet another dungeon run.

Combine all that with really interesting, tactical combat and a great meta layer that sees you adventuring across the land while trying to keep it free of invasion and corruption, and you've got a recipe for some of the most memorable non-linear stories I've ever

experienced. This is the emotional investment of *XCOM* times 100, and it's great seeing a videogame draw on the actual feel of tabletop RPGs, instead of just their mechanics or settings.

Just make sure you crank up the difficulty – your heroes' journeys and the tactical challenges of combat are both more compelling when death lurks near. Campaigns become tales of desperate resistance in the face of overwhelming odds, and that's just tasty drama.

Jody Macgregor, AU/weekend editor: I wasn't sure about *Wildermyth* at first. I liked the magic and the papercraft monsters hopping around like invisible hands are picking them up, though the adventurers

resemble smug protagonists of early 2000s webcomics. They shouldn't be fighting mythic beasts, they should be arguing about Xbox games on a couch.

But I kept playing and I'm glad I did. In a great campaign called 'Eluna and the Moth', I brought back old characters

alongside fresh ones, and though reset to first level they progressed in other ways. One's flame-arm spread to cover other limbs, another went

from having wings to just being a crow. Their relationships deepened as well, developing romances and rivalries that played into how they fought together. As Robin says, it's like a tabletop campaign that runs for ages, players coming and going, all the stories getting tangled up together. ■

CAMPAIGNS BECOME TALES OF DESPERATE RESISTANCE





FORZA HORIZON 5

★ **Phil Savage, UK editor-in-chief:** Once again, Playground Games has stitched together a massive patchwork representation of a place, and filled it full of theme park delights. There's the Baja Desert, where you can smash into cacti to build up a massive skill combo. There's La Gran Caldera, an active volcano with twisting dirt roads and a mountainside that's just begging to be used for offroad stunts. There's jungle and farmland and a big airstrip for drag races.

In short, *Forza Horizon 5*'s Mexico makes for a varied car playground. In terms of construction, it's much the same as Australia and the UK before it: different biomes that prioritise fun over realism, and that are filled with enough races, challenges and collectibles to keep you exploring for hundreds of hours.

Yes, we could have given *Forza Horizon 5* a 'Best Racing' award and been done with it, but to do so would have been to miss the point. The racing is a part of the *Forza Horizon* series, sure, but more than that it's an enthusiastic celebration of videogame driving. Cars are

handed out like RPG loot, and they're used for more than just its vast series of checkpoint races. There are 'PR stunts' that each celebrate a different discipline, from drifting to doing inadvisably massive jumps. There are sidestories that set you specific goals as you're transformed into, for instance, the stunt driver of some ridiculous action blockbuster. There's even a surprisingly decent battle royale mode.

In most games, a giant open world full of icons would exhaust me. But in *Forza Horizon 5*, each is a guarantee of something fun to do in a car. If you love racing games, this series remains the pinnacle of the form.

THIS SERIES REMAINS THE PINNACLE OF THE FORM

Jacob Ridley: Ahead of *Forza Horizon 5*'s release, I was still

playing *Forza Horizon 4*. I never really put it down. So the fact that *Forza Horizon 5* feels very much a shinier version of that same game, well, that's all I could've asked for.

There's a ton of beauty in the Mexican map and a whole lot to do. Though, saying that, I found I spent my first few hours on a joy ride for no other reason than the thrill of the drive and the beauty of the landscape. ■



PERSONAL PICK



Lauren Aitken

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA: WRATH OF THE DRUIDS

I haven't had a lot of time to play games in 2021, so it's unsurprising that my GOTY is actually some DLC. *Wrath of the Druids* took Eivor off to Ireland and it was a lovely departure from fighting around England. I enjoyed following Ciara around and listening to her sing between fighting the creepy and mysterious druids and exploring parts of Ireland I'm familiar with.



PERSONAL PICK



Natalie Clayton

UNBEATABLE: WHITE LABEL

Unbeatable is without question the coolest game I played this year, and it's not even done yet.

Despite being a Kickstarter demo with a handful of songs, *White Label* is a banging rhythm game in its own right, serving up anime-tinted pop rock beats and VHS visuals, and has even dropped a few extra tracks over the year.

Mark my words – when *Unbeatable* hits for real, I won't be talking about anything else.



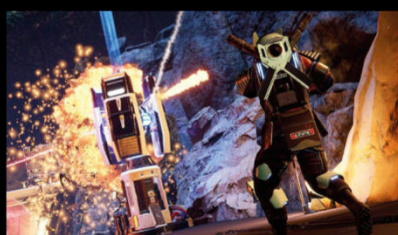
PERSONAL PICK



Evan Lahti

LEMNIS GATE

In a gaming year defined by time gimmicks, *Lemnis Gate* managed to quietly turn the FPS into something much more like 3D chess. You and your opponent deploy characters one by one, playing out their actions in a 25-second span. Your fourth move might be a landmine that alters the history of the match, erasing the moment that your opponent captured an objective. A smart game worth celebrating.



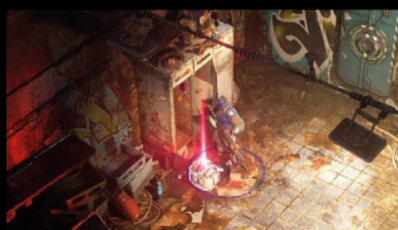
PERSONAL PICK



Fraser Brown

THE ASCENT

I'm a simple man who loves bright lights, big guns, and stupid clothes, and *The Ascent* gives me all three by the truckload. This cyberpunk action-RPG is a stunning, explosive romp through a dazzling but simultaneously filthy megacity. An early weapon lets you spew a barrage of rockets like a machine gun, and that really sets the tone for the whole thing. When it comes out, the party begins.



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

★ **Fraser Brown, online editor:** My love for *Guardians of the Galaxy* makes me feel very basic – a big Marvel action game with quips, how novel! – but I can't help myself. It's an incredibly entertaining jaunt through colourful alien planets, cop-infested spaceships, and a city chilling out inside the skull of cosmic god, elevated beyond a popcorn-munching diversion by the Guardians themselves.

Star-Lord is a man-child leading a bickering team of semi-reformed criminals who don't respect him. He's the only member of the Guardians you'll directly control, and starting out you're a bit of a punching bag. But over the course of the 15-hour adventure, the team becomes a support system, helping each other work through trauma in genuinely heartwarming and heartbreaking moments. And when things threaten to get sickeningly sentimental, there's guaranteed to be a joke or a fight right around the corner to give you time to dry those tears.

It's very 2021 – a comedy action game that's secretly a big therapy session. These different sides never trip over each other, either – it's all holistic. When you're exploring a planet or

fighting some space cops, the Guardians are always chatting away, forging bonds, working through shit or firing out meme-worthy running gags. The heroes-in-training and their punchy dialogue might be the high point, but it also makes everything else so much better. I've been a fan of this lot since they first teamed up in 2008, but this might be the best they've ever been.

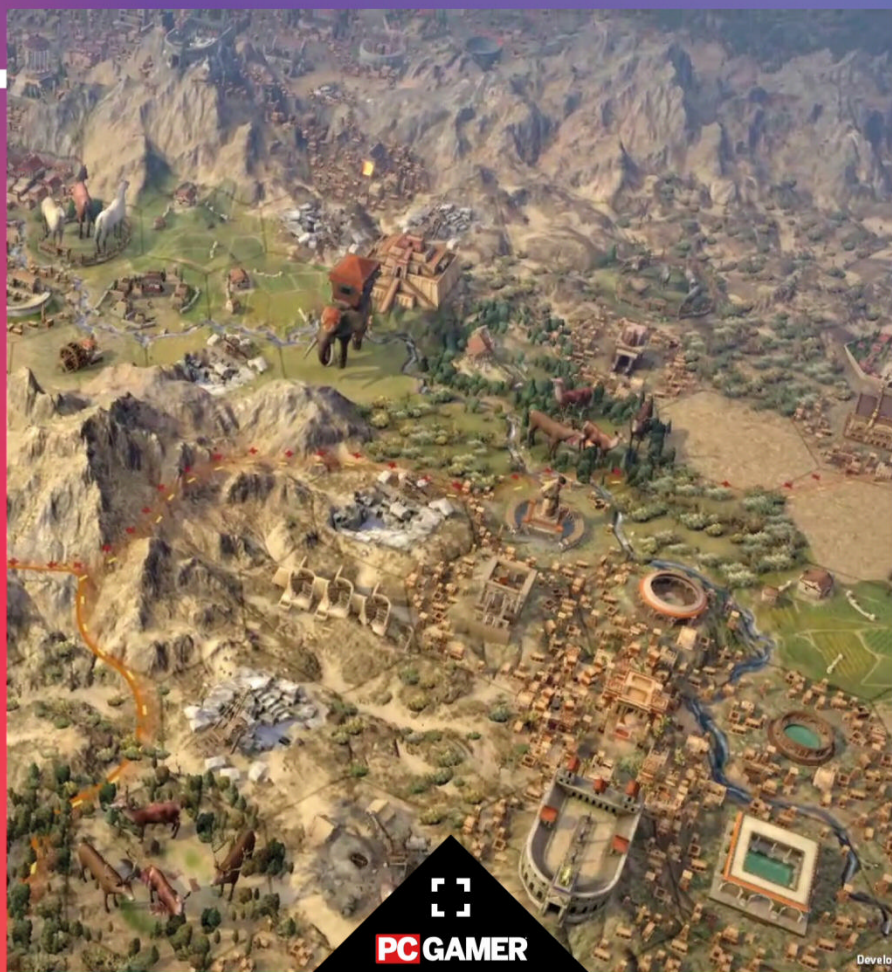
Morgan Park: *Guardians* is basically *Uncharted* with better characters. All of the enjoyable hours spent shooting, climbing, and walking are really just sponges for hours of engrossing, funny chatter between teammates. I love that even during a fight or treacherous climb, the game makes you an active participant in every conversation with binary dialogue

choices. Not every choice has an impact on the mission, but you often set the group's mood with your input. Before long, keeping everyone's spirits high became as important as shooting straight.

As someone who's never cared for the world or characters of *Deus Ex*, I'm thoroughly impressed that Eidos has whipped up a better version of the Guardians than the MCU could ever dream of. ■

AN UNCHARTED GAME WITH BETTER CHARACTERS





PC GAMER
**BEST
STRATEGY**
2021

OLD WORLD

★ **Fraser Brown:** I've dreamed of splicing all my favourite games with *Crusader Kings* at some point or another, but few more so than *Civilization*. Firaxis' series has spawned some genuine masterpieces, but it's also starting to feel a bit familiar and unadventurous, especially compared to Paradox's wildly ambitious and proudly weird grand strategy RPG. Could the best parts of both coexist in a single game? *Old World* proved they could, while also being a fantastic historical 4X in its own right.

Old World is a game of building empires and expanding cities, but with heaps of human drama and complications, and both aspects interact with each other in interesting ways. When you found a city, for instance, you have to make a single family its ruler. Each comes with unique mechanical bonuses, but there's also your relationship with the families to consider, and the people who belong to them. Maybe you'll give it to the family of your favourite general and best mate, or use it as an olive branch to mend things with a family you've pissed off.

All the intrigue and strategy exist in harmony, even if things aren't looking so great at court.

It's so much more than *Civ* with *Crusader Kings*' humanity, though. Mohawk Games and designer Soren Johnson have also reconsidered a big list of 4X systems, as well as finding ways to make the genre more manageable without sacrificing complexity – sometimes they add even more interesting opportunities. The Orders system is fantastic for this very reason. It ostensibly limits how much you can do in a single turn, teaching you to prioritise, but that limitation can be neutralised by making certain decisions that will shape your civilisation and ruler. Simpler but just as welcome, you can undo any action you take, or an entire turn. It's great for fixing silly mistakes, but it's also a boon for experimentation and learning the ropes.

All this, combined with its more focused timeframe – the name's a giveaway – and fairly brisk campaign make it easy to get stuck into, but it's still dense and sometimes opaque. I thought it was great at launch, but I can appreciate it even more now. ■



DEATHLOOP

★ **Phil Savage:** Finally, an Arkane game that dares you to let your hair down. Where *Dishonored* wagged its finger at high-chaos murder and mayhem, *Deathloop* positively revels in it. Sure, your overall objective is to break the very timeloop that lets you fight and kill without consequence, but along the way it's constantly asking: do you really want this to end? Are you not having fun?

I am having fun. It's easy to miss how good Arkane's combat usually is, because there's a sense that being quiet and nonlethal is the right way to play. In *Deathloop*, the lack of a quickload key means that, if you're spotted, you're unable to correct your mistake. And eventually you start to ask if being noticed is even a mistake at all. You've got an arsenal of cool guns, and a selection of powers that make you really good at taking out your targets. Is it really so bad to use them?

It's all underpinned by the invasion system, where other players can join your game in an attempt to hunt you down. These cat-and-mouse battles let you use the full breadth of

Deathloop's many systems, in encounters that are as hilarious as they are tense. There's little more satisfying than turning an invader's impatience against them as you slowly manipulate the environment to your advantage. And, as an invader, it feels great to weaponise the added tension of your sudden appearance – goading your quarry into making a mistake that costs them their life.

Deathloop has as much in common with Arkane's entertainingly messy *Dark Messiah: Might & Magic* as it does with the seminal *Dishonored* series, and it's all the better for it.

Jody Macgregor: *Deathloop* does feel like Arkane's response to people who felt pressured to sneak through *Dishonored*. That's how I'd have played whether it felt right or not, so *Deathloop* – with its guilt-free murderthons and, instead of quicksaves, a modern take on ye olde three lives – shouldn't be for me. And yet I kicked people off cliffs, ran across rooftops, set off dominos to drop a landmine on someone's head, and loved it all. ■





PC GAMER
BEST
STEALTH
2021

HITMAN 3



Fraser Brown: For the site, I wrote a far-too-revealing feature about really wanting a game where Agent 47 chases me. Then I tried to get Andy Kelly to ask Agent 47 voice actor David Bateson to record himself saying, “I’m coming to get you, Fraser”. He chickened out and now he is dead (to me). You could say I really got into *Hitman 3*.

It’s weird to think of it as a stealth game. In one of the most out-there missions, I spent my first attempt in-character as a detective in an Agatha Christie knock-off, right up until the point where I killed my target. There are more traditionally sneaky routes through every map, of course, but *Hitman*’s all about that social stealth, and 3 has some of the strongest examples out of the whole trilogy. Agent 47 gets plenty of chances to show off his acting chops, even though they still just amount to putting on a disguise and acting and sounding just like his regular spooky self.

The murder mystery in Dartmoor and the elaborate Chongqing mission are where we get to see IO at its most experimental, but for the purists there’s Berlin and the sandbox of a nightclub. You’ve got targets you know nothing about and no plan so, at least for that first playthrough, it’s all about reacting and going with your instincts. It would have probably made for a better climax than the actual final mission, the game’s only dud.

Phil Savage: Berlin really is emblematic of what makes *Hitman 3* so good. *Hitman 2*’s levels were bigger, but the sequel has a playful confidence to it – exploring the edges of what makes a great stealth sandbox to great effect.

Here, in this underground club, you’re tasked with taking out the ICA agents that are there to hunt you. Rather than a single target with a handful of big, obvious routes leading to their demise, you’re instead left to work out a series of more small-scale assassinations. Arguably this is *Hitman* at its purest: just ingenuity and opportunism at your disposal.

As Fraser mentioned, *Hitman*’s stock-in-trade is social stealth – playing dress-up to

hide in plain sight and walk among your victims. But it’s also worth celebrating the continued quality of IO’s level design. Your first playthroughs will likely be defined by the showcase solutions – Dartmoor’s detective being the most obvious example. But each level is also designed to

support its many optional challenges, the pinnacle of which is silently completing a mission without ever donning a disguise.

Attempt this

and you’ll discover new options – clever ways a level is made to reveal possibilities that you missed on your first visit. This design is what makes *Hitman 3* not just a great stealth game, but a near endlessly replayable one too – that scales to support whatever challenge you want to throw at it. ■

IT’S ALSO WORTH
CELEBRATING THE
QUALITY OF IO’S
LEVEL DESIGN



RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

★ **Jacob Ridley:** *Resident Evil Village* is a much more fast-paced game than you might expect off the back of *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*. For that, it's the *Resident Evil* game I'd recommend to those who haven't tried a *Resi* game before, as in between all the body horror there's a whole lot of running and gunning.

It also blends so many excellent horror game staples into a single, fluent game. Each primary 'area' of the map feels like a discrete experience, some more action focused and others more downright haunting. And each one home to a well-written, and well-acted, paranormal mob boss figure. *Resident Evil Village* feels like a horror game built to cater to most horror fans, and while usually that might appear overreaching, Capcom manages to thread the needle exceptionally well.

Harry Shepherd, guides editor: I skipped *Resident Evil 7*, but totally not because I was too scared. And I can prove it: I played *Resident Evil Village*. But it means my last experience of the series was the terminally bloated action movie, *Resident Evil 6*, and Ethan's terrifying jaunt through Castle

Dimitrescu could hardly be more different. In the best way possible. It also reasserted to me how useful it is to have fully-functioning hands.

Anyway, where *Resident Evil 6* was overlong, over the top, and needed the reset of 7 to get back to what the series is best at: scares. *Village* takes that a step further: It's tighter, more focused, and, most importantly, blood-curdling. As Jacob says, each area feels distinct. They're a series of neat,

horrifying episodes that feel fresh enough that, while Lady D is sent packing quicker than you might expect, you don't really mind.

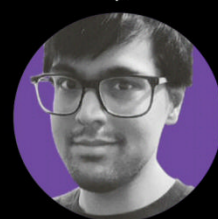
Village boasts plenty of fearsome moments, even when you're armed to the teeth. In what feels like no time at all after admiring the reveal of the Gothic castle, you're surrounded by

IT'S TIGHTER, MORE FOCUSED, AND BLOOD-CURDLING

werewolves, left scrapping for survival with a mixture of bullets, red barrels, and dumb luck. I was at my most afraid in these moments.

That said, for all the gratifying guns, the section in which they're all taken away will always live longest in the memory. The tall vampire that stole the show ahead of release may cast a long shadow, but hidden behind her was one of the scariest horror sequences I've ever played. ■

PERSONAL PICK



Tyler Colp

NIER REPLICANT

I played *Nier Replicant* because I didn't like *Nier: Automata*.

The latter game felt overwrought for a familiar story about robots with feelings. This year, I discovered that *Nier Replicant* was always the better game, blending a tragic, and sometimes comedic story with a beloved main cast. It's a game that digs into people and their desires instead of simply suggesting it. It's devastatingly honest, and I needed that this year.



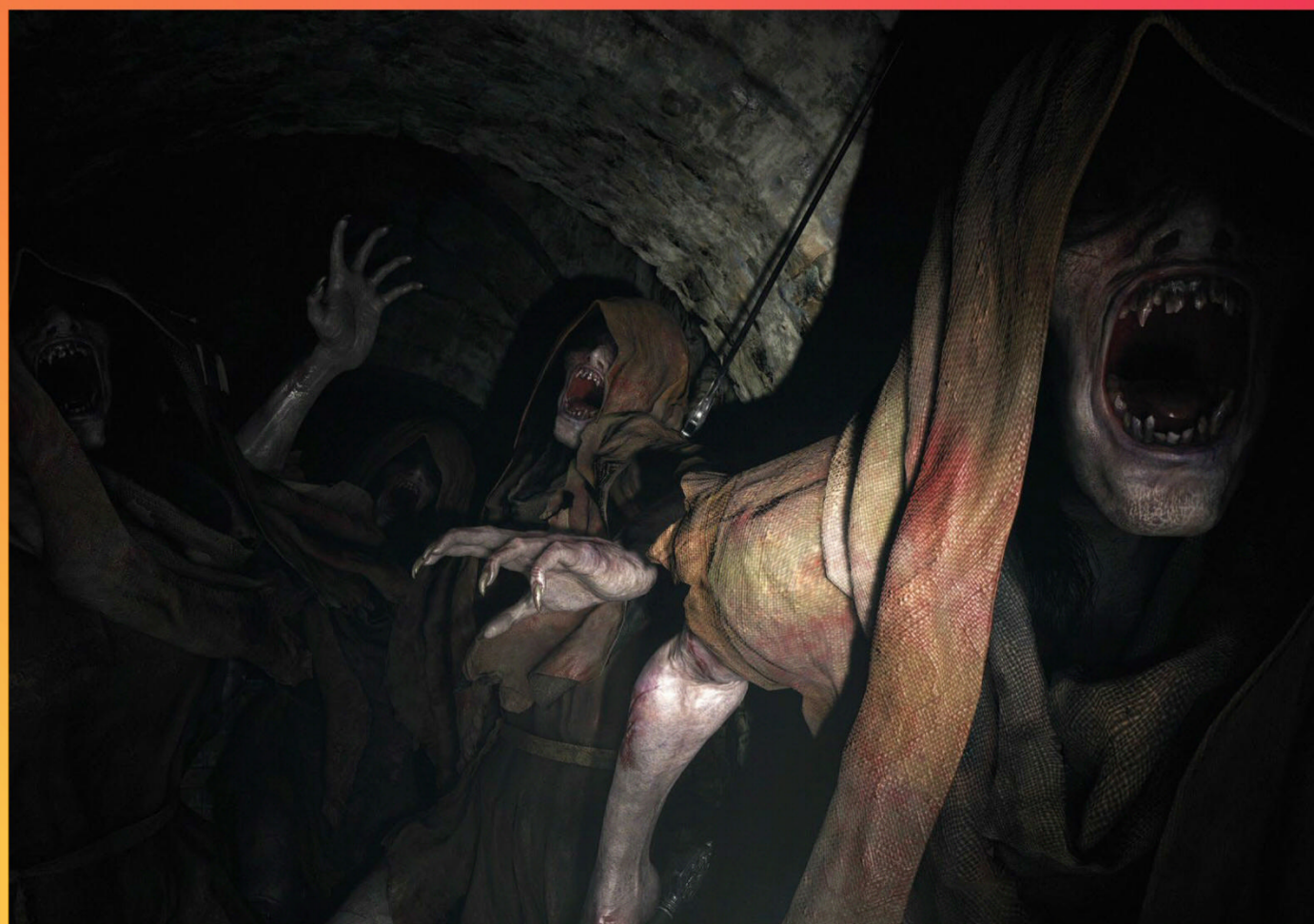
PERSONAL PICK



Lauren Morton

TOEM

Toem may be as prescriptive in its quest checklist as any adventure game, but it lets you get silly and personalise the details. Solving problems for the residents of its cute, colourless world always requires pulling out your instant camera, but there's a playfulness in deciding how to set up each requested shot after you puzzle out what's being asked for. Do you take a selfie with a dog? Whip out your foam finger?





LOOP HERO

★ **Evan Lahti:** This mighty little RPG got 50 hours out of me over the course of reviewing it. It's remarkably distilled. If *Diablo* is a ten-gallon tank of pleasant ARPG liquid, *Loop Hero* is a thimble of hyperconcentrated essence. The loop: build the level. Fight enemies (automatically). Equip loot they drop. Repeat. How does combat feel this engaging when you have essentially zero control over it? The retro sound design has a lot to do with it, steeping the whole game in a Halloween-y vibe and making weapon impacts, harpy claws, and shattered shields feel sharp.

Like the sprawling deckbuilder genre that *Slay the Spire* spawned, I hope we'll see more of this sort of thing across different themes. I can easily imagine a multiplayer version of this where you're building a board for an opponent, not unlike *Legion TD 2*.

Graeme Meredith, video producer: You see a lot of games on the indie side of things trying to replicate or re-establish retrovisuals. More often than not it's just a

practical means to an end, but the best ones really exemplify that the early years of gaming only really scratched the surface of the potential in pixel art graphics.

Not only does *Loop Hero* provide a lavish visual experience with that aesthetic, it's one of the very best 'non-specific CRT era' style games I've seen, and it's a key part of why it's so addictive. The vibrating scan lines, grimy sprite work and rattly sound effects suck you in and keep you looping your way round these maps of your own design for hours.

That, and the rumour mill it creates for itself – something typical in pre-internet gaming, but rarely seen these days. Get talking with a friend or two, sharing in the experience, and each of you might have noticed or discovered something different or unusual while running the loop. It fills you with an eagerness to share information. So it's not just the gameplay or the visuals that transfixes you, it's the time and place *Loop Hero* creates around you that makes it such a stand out this year. ■



SABLE

★ **Nat Clayton:** The hero of this desert adventure doesn't save the world. There's no existential threat, no looming war or ancient MacGuffin to recover. In fact, *Sable* doesn't really have much of a plot at all – and yet, within an hour of firing up the game, a passing conversation brought me to the brink of tears.

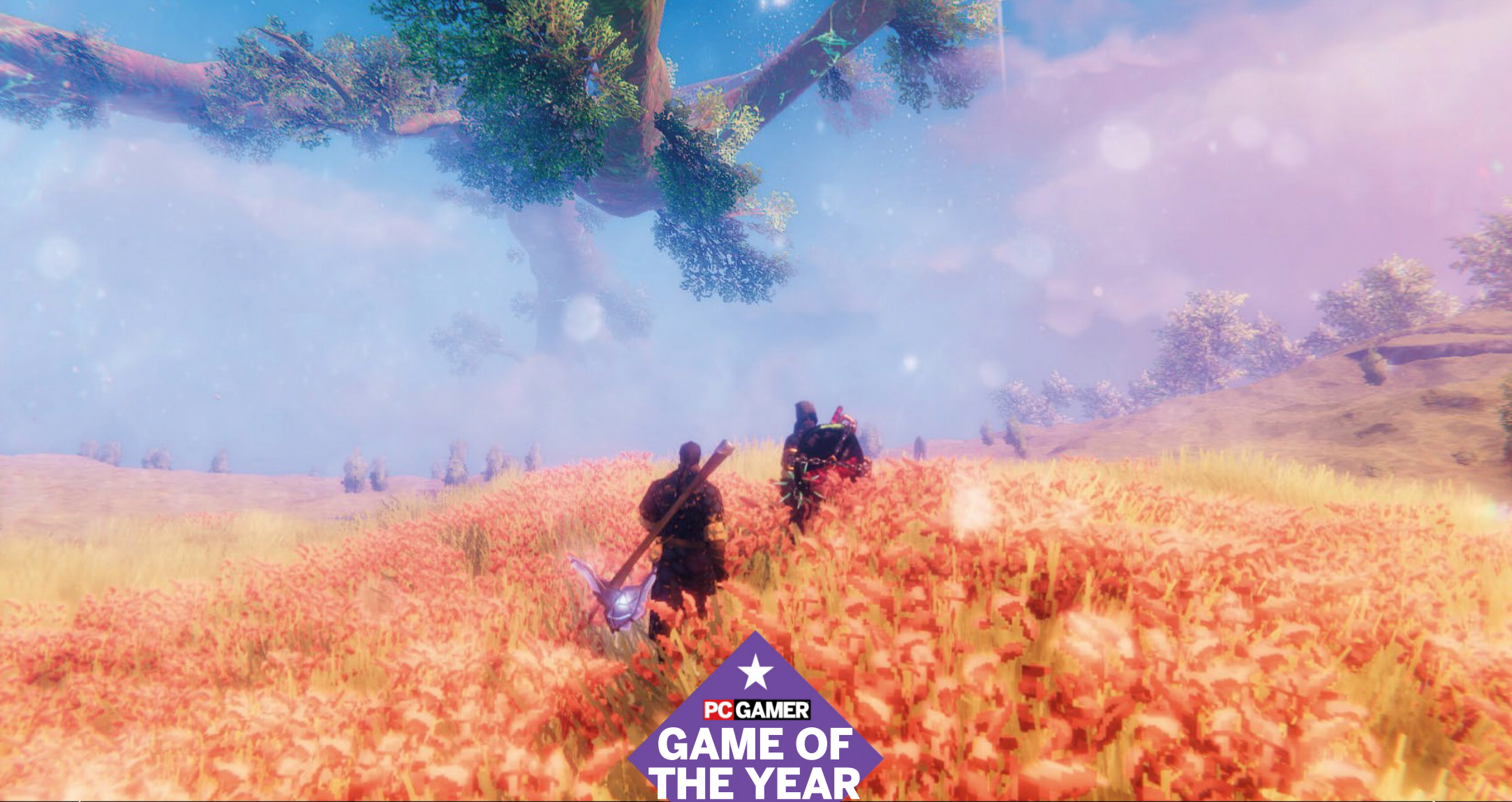
Sable is a coming-of-age story. A rite of passage that sees you leaving your family behind to explore the world and figure out who, exactly, you want to be. Every quest, every conversation, every mask and piece of clothing is there in service of finding an identity for the titular glider. Throughout the game you'll be choosing conversation options and outfitting your bike not because you need to optimise stats or grind reputations, but because it's what feels right for your Sable at that moment. Every mask you acquire is quite literally another face to try on.

There is simply such an earnest warmth to *Sable's* writing. Almost every conversation you have is fleeting and incidental, but penned with such absolute

earnestness that it's hard not to well up. You'll meet an old guard who's chosen to embark on her own journey of discovery late in life, and even the most sour-faced shopkeep meets you with the understanding that your gliding is an important moment. It resonates hard with my own brief experience of travelling after high school, experimenting with identity as I floated haphazardly between volunteer gigs across Europe.

Most telling of all is that *Sable* is happy to let you wrap things up on your own terms, whenever you feel ready. This isn't a game that wants you to rinse it of content – rather, you're free to return to your clan whenever your Sable feels she's found the mask that's right for her. It's a game about the joy of self-discovery, encouraging you to reflect during those long desert rides, best summed up in a tear-jerking line from one of your clanmates at the very beginning of your journey.

"Try to have fun. There's a lot to be said about ritual and independence and all of that out there, but the world's an easier place if you put joy first." ■



★
PC GAMER
**GAME OF
THE YEAR**
2021

VALHEIM

★ **Lauren Morton, associate editor:** The week *Valheim* launched, I scoffed, “Do we really need another Early Access crafting survival game?” Whether or not we needed one, the appetite I and all of my friends developed for scarfing down over 100 hours within a month suggested we very much wanted one.

On paper, *Valheim* is like any other crafting survival game. You begin your adventure by picking up rocks and sticks, slapping together a crude stone axe, and then chopping down every tree in sight. In practice, it’s full of twists. The building system with supports and structural integrity challenged me to finally think about base building as a technical puzzle instead of just an aesthetic one. The food system that required me to think about boosting my health and stamina convinced me that I should spare a thought for cooking after I couldn’t be bothered in any other game. Small touches like needing to touch a resource before discovering what I could craft with it made for a bit of extra delight.

Ultimately, the fact that all my friends wanted to spend countless late nights together planning some grand longboat expedition across a sea we’d yet to cross or into the swamps was what I loved about *Valheim*. Millions of people spending two months absorbed in an Early Access game made by a tiny studio is the kind of magic I adore about PC gaming.

Christopher Livingston, features producer: It says something about the size and scope of *Valheim* that I played for 20

hours before I realised that I’m on an island, not a continent. I’m on a tiny tutorial island and there’s a huge world out there full of other stuff I haven’t even seen yet. The day I left my island, bringing everything I could carry onto my little wooden raft and setting off across a vast ocean, headed for the unknown, was a thrilling adventure. And now every trip I make into the unknown in *Valheim* feels like a bold adventure with that same awe and wonder I felt on my first shaky voyage.

Jacob Ridley: Like Lauren, I was done with survival games when *Valheim* rolled around. Well, I thought I was. Tune in a month or so later and I’ve played over 100 hours of *Valheim* and counting. There was just

something so accessible about the look and feel of *Valheim*’s world, and the fact there is always something to keep you occupied, be

that building or exploration.

I spent tens of hours building a manor house on top of a precariously placed rock, in one of the most inhospitable biomes in *Valheim* – racing to have the highest tower against a friend who set up on the next rock over. I sailed across the ocean to find the best sources of ore to smelt to build up towns and villages spanning islands. I set up trade routes with friends in other areas of the world, and created bridges and canals, partially changing the face of the landscape.

Truly the most fun I’ve had in a game all year, and it offered a great opportunity to share that enjoyment with my friends as we explored together. ■

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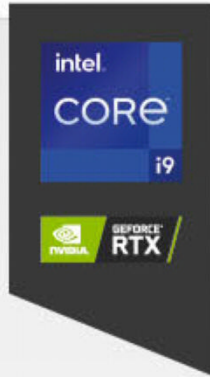
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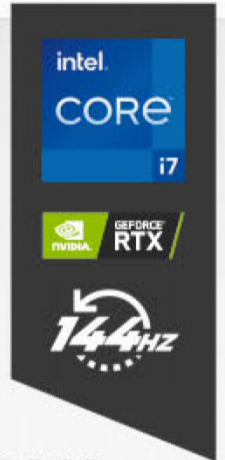
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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

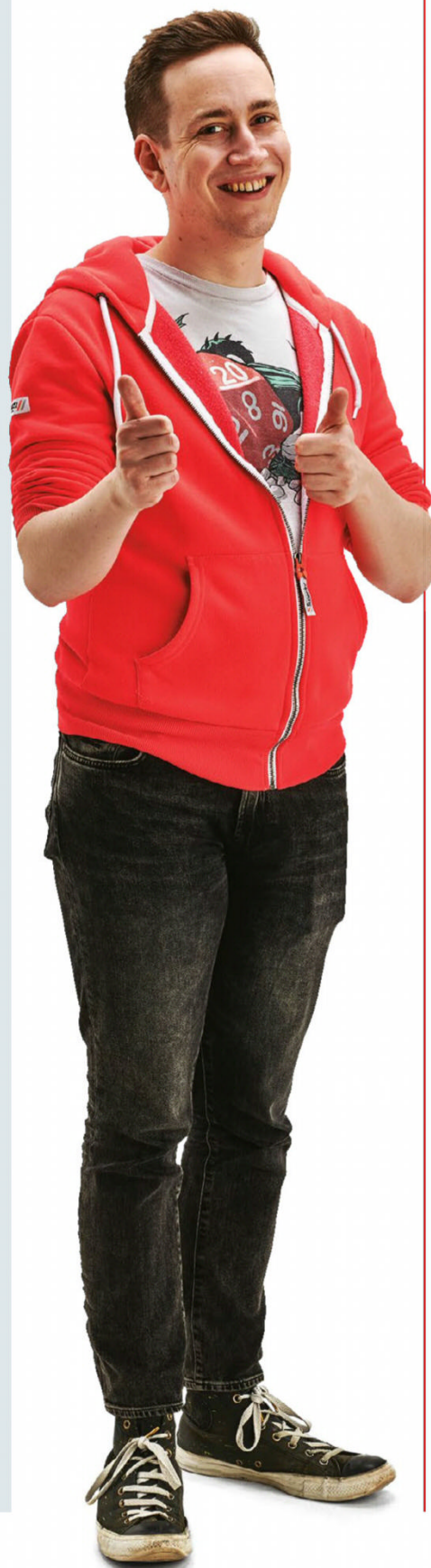
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



It's war

It's time once again to return to an age-old conflict. Not WWII – I'm talking about the traditional head-to-head between *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty*. How odd it feels, in 2021 – these two venerable giants, both wrestling not just with each other for multiplayer shooter success, but also with their own identities in a world where online gaming is more associated with battle royales, IP mash-ups, surprise successes, and endless live service than these kinds of big tentpole FPS releases. Swinging back and forth between the Three Sanctioned Settings (world war, modern, futuristic), each simultaneously seem to want to reinvent the series with each release, but without willingness to stray from the safety of past success. The war rages on, but are we simply stuck in the trenches? Anyway, turns out *Battlefield* is the good one this year.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's 360 no-scoping reviewers...



RICK LANE
Specialist in
First-person snoozing
Currently playing
Call of Duty: Vanguard
This month
Earned some more Battle of Normandy loyalty points. Almost enough for a free pen!



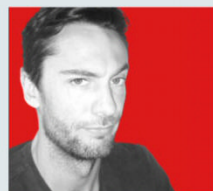
PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Shredding the gnar
Currently playing
Riders Republic
This month
Slid down a mountain very quickly several times, on several different objects.



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Holmes improvement
Currently playing
Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One
This month
Why does Sherlock keep getting sexier? Fraser investigates.



TYLER WILDE
Specialist in
Unpowered flight
Currently playing
Battlefield 2042
This month
Was handed level creation tools, and used them to turn people into missiles.



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Hand stretches
Currently playing
Age of Empires IV
This month
Learned a bit about medieval warfare, and a lot about keyboard shortcuts.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Soil dampening
Currently playing
The Florist
This month
Kept digital houseplants alive, while his real ones shrivelled and died.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Inventory tetris
Currently playing
Resident Evil
This month
Used his monthly column to boast about how many items he can carry.

DUTY STALLS

Despite some impressive moments, **CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD** struggles to stand out

By Rick Lane

Once again, *Call of Duty* spins its wheel of war, and for the sixth time in the series' history, the needle has landed on 'World War the Second'. *Call of Duty* has always been most comfortable booting Hitler right in the Panzerschrecks, nestled cosily in the history of the victors, safe in the knowledge that the baddies really were bad. But it's also the most difficult setting from which to build something new. There are only so many World War II battles, after all, and *Call of Duty* has covered them exhaustively over the years.

It's a problem that *Vanguard* fails to resolve, which is a shame because there are hints of more interesting ideas amid the game's familiar sights and sounds. But in the end *Vanguard* submits to expectation. There are certain things a *Call of Duty* game must be, and Sledgehammer ticks those boxes in dependable but unadventurous fashion. The campaign is most indicative of the gulf between *Vanguard's* ideas and execution. The story revolves around a group of special forces agents plucked from different theatres of the war, who are dispatched on a secret mission to Berlin in the final days of the Reich. The action commences with a raid on a German train while fires from the Russian advance rage in the distance. This rolls seamlessly into an assault on a submarine dock, where the group learns about a secret Nazi operation known as Project Phoenix.

OPSY DAISY

It's an interesting setup for a WWII shooter. The prospect of following this group of renegades through infernal Berlin is tantalising, and I was keen to see what tale Sledgehammer would spin in this relatively unexplored area of the war. But this isn't what happens. Immediately after the raid, your group of agents are captured by the Nazis, and spend most of the remaining campaign imprisoned beneath some gloomy Nazi

administration building. While our heroes sit around sucking their teeth, the campaign hops between flashbacks that individually focus on each member of the team's experiences during the war. In other words, what initially seems like a different take on the Second World War turns out to be just another playable highlight reel of the conflict. Admittedly, Sledgehammer tries to put twists on the more familiar encounters. The obligatory D-Day mission involves parachuting into treacherous Normandy woodland before assaulting a clifftop bunker from behind to facilitate the D-Day landings, while the Pacific themed Numa Numa Trail sees you join forces with an all-black American unit, dodging Japanese deathtraps and snipers in preparation for a spectacular assault on an airfield. The highlight of the campaign is

Sledgehammer tries to put twists on the more familiar encounters

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? Activision's annual cash-cow, this time with a World War II theme.
- EXPECT TO PAY £50
- DEVELOPER Sledgehammer Games
- PUBLISHER Activision
- REVIEWED ON AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER Yes
- LINK callofduty.com

Stalingrad Summer, which gives you a taste of life in WWII's lynchpin city prior to the Nazi assault, before all hell breaks loose in the campaign's standout action sequence. Not all the missions are so well thought out. The later missions set in north Africa are spectacular, and lent a sense of fun by your team of cocky Australian saboteurs. But ultimately it's a derivative drive through the desert. The biggest letdown is the Battle of Midway, where breath-taking scenes of aerial combat are undermined by *Call of Duty's* refusal to cede control of the flightstick, constantly pushing you toward the next objective rather than giving you a chance to enjoy the fighting.

TEAM PLAYERS

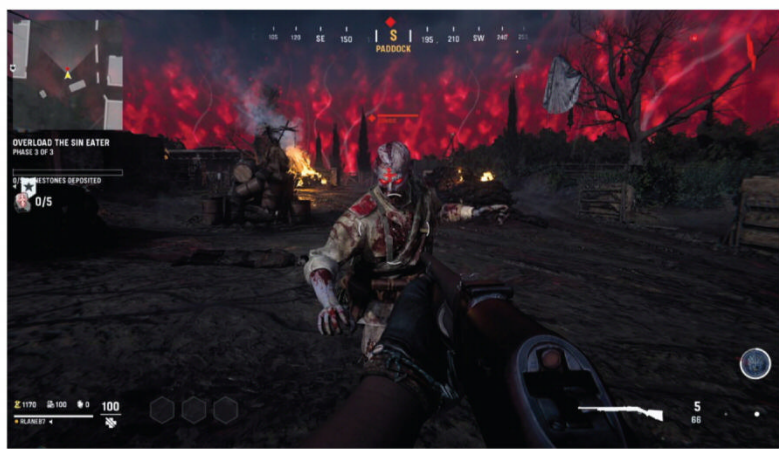
The campaign's broader issue, though, is it offers little opportunity to experience your spec-ops team as a team. It's a shame because, for once, the characters are a likeable bunch. The writing may be heavily splashed with patriotic pathos, and the fact the game uses quotes from its own characters for the death-screens is painfully pretentious. But the general rapport of the squad is engaging, while characters like Lucas the Australian saboteur, and Polina the Russian sniper, are given enough depth to make you care about them. Sadly, there are only two missions in which the squad actually work together. The rest of the time, they're incarcerated in a prison cell, while Dominic Monaghan's creepy Nazi administrator tries his best to conceal *Vanguard's* almost complete lack of plot. The cutscenes are long and meandering, and it all leads up to an underwhelming final mission. As the campaign struggles to make the best of its ideas, multiplayer is more progressive, bringing a couple of broad changes and more bespoke new features that make a small but noticeable difference from previous years. Foremost among the new additions are more destructable

WAR NEVER CHANGES

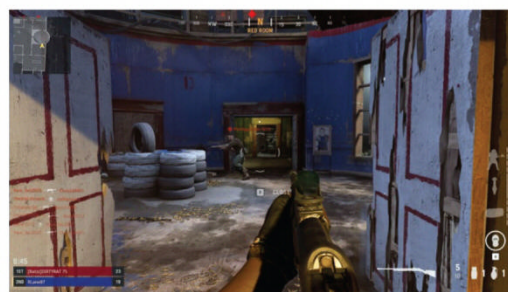
My rating of the CoD WWII campaigns

Call of Duty	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: United Offensive	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty 2	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty 3 (not on PC)	☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: World at War	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: WWII	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: Vanguard	★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

Better wrap up warm or you'll catch your death.



Killstreaks are as spectacular and unbalanced as ever.



LEFT: A sprinkling of destruction tech means some walls and doors deteriorate as the match progresses.



BELOW LEFT: The Vanguard squad are a surprisingly likeable bunch, but you don't spend much time with them together.

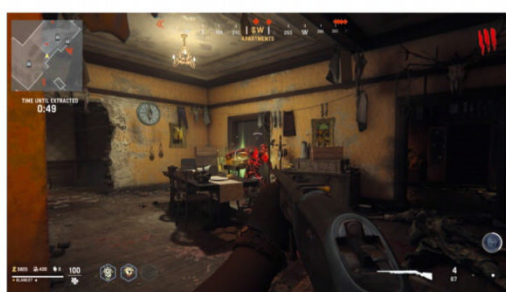


CoD's awkward relationship with vehicles continues in the Battle of Midway Mission.

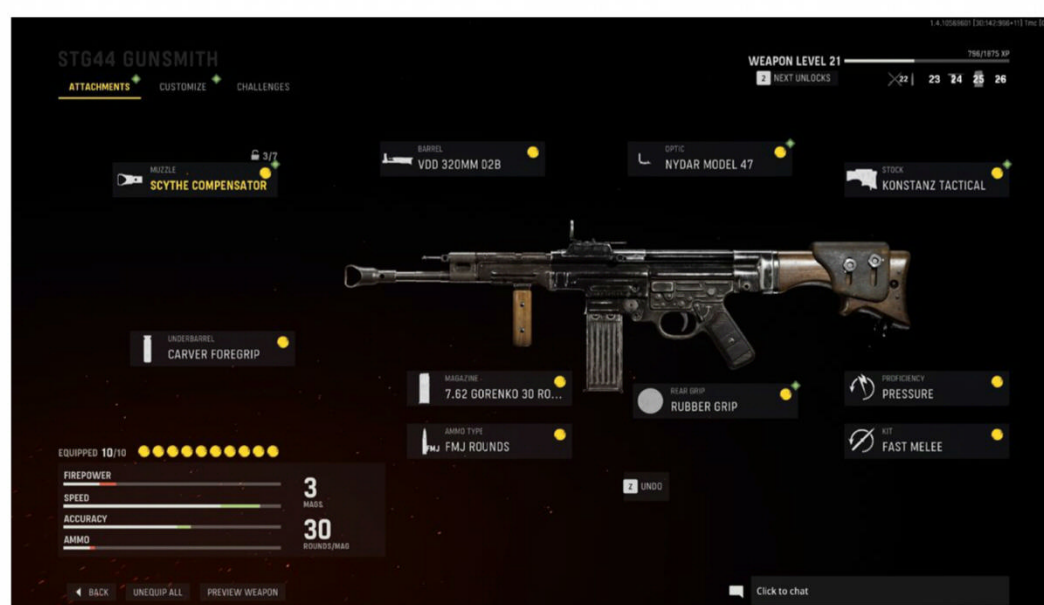
Vanguard's flamethrowers are terrifyingly effective.



RIGHT: An exploding zombie. What will they think of next?



FAR RIGHT: Gunsmith's back, and even more weirdly positioned than it was in *Black Ops: Cold War*.



Even the portals in *Vanguard* are evil.

» maps. While we're not talking *Battlefield* levels of destruction, certain walls and windows can be shattered to alter the flow of maps, and environments are subject to a more cosmetic 'dirtying' over time. It gives the maps a satisfying sense of progression, and it's fun to see the mess left behind by a half-dozen bombing-run killstreaks.

Less notable but arguably more significant is the introduction of Combat Pacing, which essentially lets you select the rough player-count for each mode. There are three pacing levels: Tactical, Assault, and Blitz. Tactical keeps the player count low, resulting in an almost *Counter-Strike* feel. Blitz, meanwhile, can have anywhere between 16 and 48 players, which means intense action and killstreaks by the bucketload. Personally, I liked letting the game cycle through the different tiers. It made for a good showcase of how varied *Vanguard's* multiplayer can be.

Modes-wise, *Vanguard* hinges heavily around classic scenarios like Team Deathmatch and Domination, while there's a new version of *Modern Warfare's* Gunfight mode called Champion Kill. This sees players square off in teams of two or three in small-scale rounds. You all start off with the same loadout, but cash you earn by winning lets you upgrade your weapons and equipment, meaning fights gradually diversify as they progress.

For me, though, the highlight of *Vanguard's* multiplayer is Patrol. This is a capture and hold-scenario similar to Domination, but there is only one control point that moves randomly around the map. This makes it far more dynamic than traditional Domination, as the team in control must constantly adjust its defence to counter new sightlines or angles of attack. It's a fun, frenetic mode that balances teamwork with your ability to react, although it's best played on Tactical or Assault Pacing. Blitz turns Patrol into a chaotic pile-on.

SMITHING THE POINT

All considered, I like *Vanguard's* multiplayer, but there's nothing here that makes it a must-buy. Like the campaign, it seems to struggle with the World War II setting. There's

nothing as interesting as *Call of Duty: WWII's* War mode, for example, while the whole gunsmithing element of the game feels entirely out-of-place with World War II era-weaponry. Indeed, one thing I would like from *Vanguard* is a 'no attachments' mode, where you play exclusively with the default weapons – scopes and stocks be damned.

I suppose I'm now obliged to talk about Zombies. Cards on the table, I've never really cared for *CoD's* Zombies mode, and *Vanguard's* version does little to convince me that I'm missing out. Der Anfang centres

around a hub in Stalingrad, from which you can access portals that transport you to different places like Paris or the Pacific, where you must complete one of three objective types. One sees you collecting runes to disable a series of magic obelisks, another involves protecting a floating orb as it travels around the map, and the third is a 'kill zombies until the timer runs out' affair.

Completing these missions earns you Cursed Hearts. These are spent at an altar on various powers that can combine with your weapons and abilities in, well, I was going to say 'interesting ways' but frankly that's pushing it. For example, I combined the combat shotgun with an ability that reloads your gun for you on a critical hit. The result of this was I

hardly had to reload again, letting me mow zombies down easily. More powerful versions of these abilities become available to buy as the zombie horde grows, so the combat scales in intensity as you progress. But with only three mission types and three zombie types, the hamster-wheel grind quickly emerges.

STORMY WEATHER

There is one last issue relating to this year's *Call of Duty* that must be addressed. Sledgehammer's game releases off the back of truly horrific allegations of discrimination and sexual harassment at Activision Blizzard has led to the state of California suing the company. It's the most egregious example yet of the game industry's endemic mistreatment of women.

Sledgehammer, for its part, addressed the allegations against its parent company in the run-up to release, and there are ongoing efforts by the ABK Workers' Alliance to improve the culture of the company.

It's difficult to address this topic in a sufficiently nuanced fashion within the scope of a review. The PC Gamer site has covered the story extensively as it has unfolded and will continue to do so. Nonetheless, during the process of review the allegations were never far from my mind, and although I wouldn't want to punish the work of Sledgehammer for actions taken by people elsewhere in Activision Blizzard, I also find it hard not to be frustrated at the prospect of who might profit from the positive things I've said about *Vanguard*, and how that feeds, however slightly or indirectly, into facilitating a culture of harassment and abuse.

I hope there is no need to make such clarifications in the future, because there are glimpses of ingenuity within *Vanguard*, and perhaps Sledgehammer can take those ideas and run further on its next outing with the series. This time around though, my feelings are largely indifferent. The singleplayer has a couple of great missions, and the multiplayer has a couple of good modes. But on the whole, *Vanguard* is a war we've seen before. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Multiplayer is as good as ever, but the campaign and Zombies mode fail to capitalise on what could be interesting ideas.

60

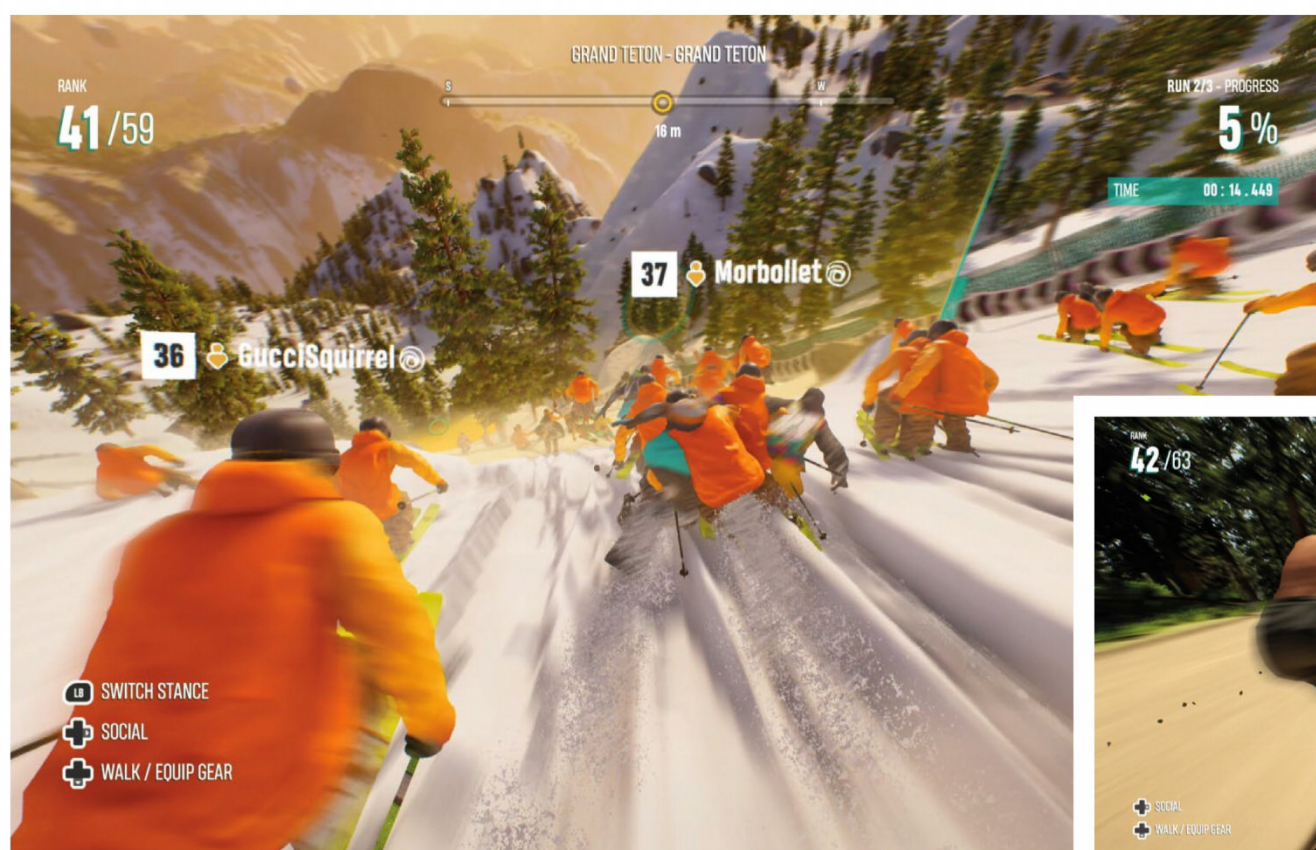
Modes-wise, Vanguard hinges heavily around classic scenarios



HAMMERING IT HOME

Sledgehammer's decade with Call of Duty

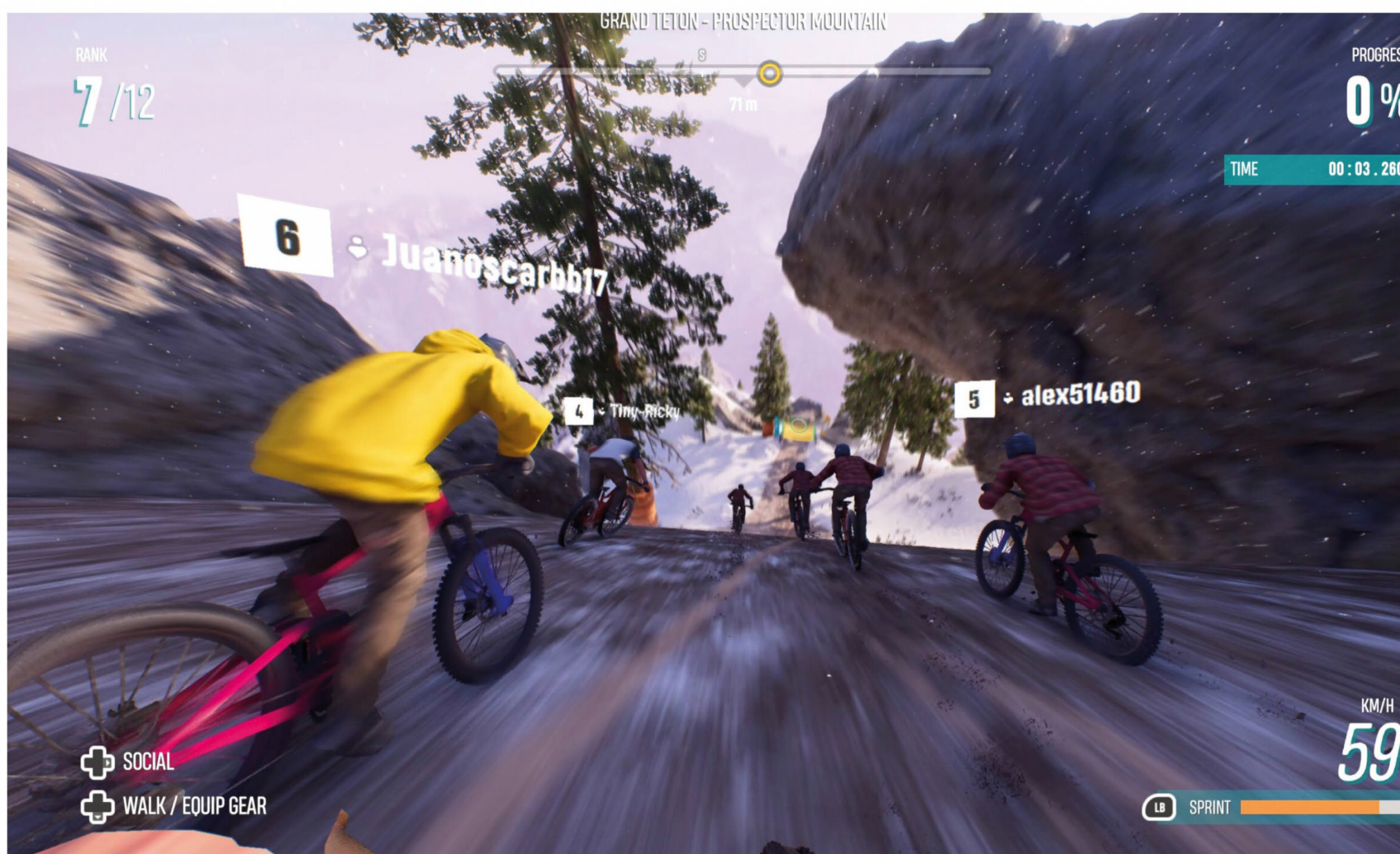
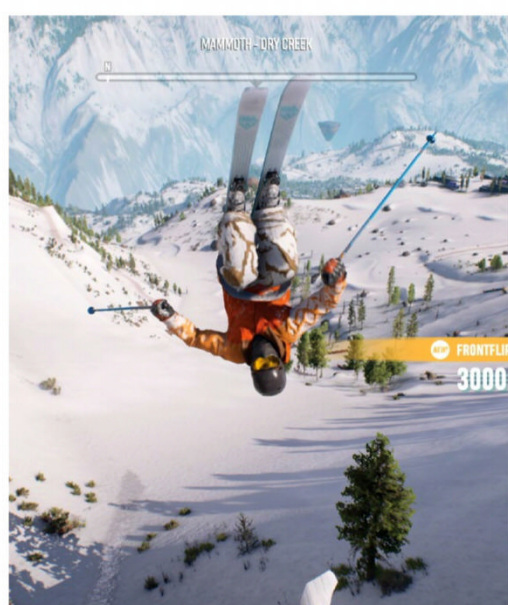




ABOVE: One of us should go home and change or it'll be embarrassing.

RIGHT: "Am I doing it right?" – Phil's last words on the slopes.

BELOW: Suddenly, riding without a helmet feels like a poor choice.



PARTY LINES

RIDERS REPUBLIC falls just short of shred heaven

By Phil Iwaniuk

It might not sound like it, but trust me – it’s hip...” One of the many disembodied voices guiding me through this bold new society of extreme sports types in the mountains is telling me I can win a pizza delivery bike in the next event. She’s also, knowingly or not, critiquing herself. Everybody here talks like they’re hooked up to a Red Bull IV drip and graduated English class taught by *Life is Strange*’s Chloe. It’s a bit much.

A bit much can also be a good thing, you understand. Ubisoft Annecy’s spiritual sequel to *Steep* is a decidedly maximalist game, albeit an untamed and jabbering one. Joining the snowsports and wingsuits from its ancestor are biking disciplines and powered vehicles, all ready to be swapped between in real-time with a button press and thumbstick flick.

A patchwork quilt of real-world national parks forms the sumptuous world map, red rock giving way to budding tundra succumbing to powdery white peaks. Event markers pop up like energy drink-branded pestilence, waiting for the park ranger protagonist to clean them all up using their aptitude for shredding, catching sick bumps, and other such hijinks.

Marquee events, unlocked by reaching milestones in a given discipline, are particular highlights and throw in wildly different geographical propositions. And tucked away behind the events are super-technical pro line runs that require *Super Meat Boy*-like feats of daring and dexterity.

Once in a while, a different disembodied voice ushers us to mass events, where up to 64 players embark on absurd jaunts by bike, skis, snowboards, and rocket wingsuits.

There’s a lot more to digest in this melange of *Forza Horizon*, *The Crew 2*, and *Destiny* than *Steep* offered. With each completed event, *Riders Republic* showers new stuff everywhere. Gear, character levels, events, bucks to spend on outfits,

sponsors who offer daily challenges which, when completed, shower even more stuff all over the floor.

It’s easy to just let yourself get caught in the jetstream of this frenzied progression and whizz along in it, enjoying *Riders Republic* on its own terms. Do a race, listen to someone describe how rad that thing you did was, watch a brief cutscene of a snowboard being

unlocked, do another race.

That’s my advice. Don’t think too much, just keep nodding along with the X-Games bros and winning stars. Because like many a 20th century communist republic, this one is built on pretty shaky ground.

It starts with the physical models underpinning the many disciplines on offer. It’s clear from the first over-caffeinated whooping noise that Ubisoft Annecy is going for simplicity, but in whittling each handling model down to such basic terms it’s taking away much of what ought to be

Keep nodding along with the X-Games bros and winning stars

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An extreme sports open-world – think *Steep 2* with bikes

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 1080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/riders-republic

interesting about sending a MTB down a mountain. It was hours before I accepted that there really is no wheelie function, or an endo.

REPUBLIC INQUIRY

Stunt controls fare much better under long-term exploration, particularly with manual landing selected. No, it’s the races where you have time to want more, even as the excitable voices distract you from it.

Ubisoft Annecy’s either lampooning the cringey exuberance of extreme sports culture, or emulating it sincerely. Both music and dialogue miss the mark, wherever the intended mark is, and very often *Riders Republic* sounds like game developers approximating cool, in the same way those medieval artists who’d never seen lions had a stab at them on a coat of arms.

Between us though, I’d take a soundtrack comprised entirely of tiresome Coolio covers in exchange for some mechanical tweaks like a no-contact online race option, rider weight controls that allow fine control and wheelies, and a button actually rewinds the AI too, not just me.

There are tonal irritations. There’s a drunken imprecision to control at times. But I’m not ready to pack up, shave off my soul patch, and join the ranks of the normies. If *Riders Republic* isn’t delivering on its premise, why do I care so much about winning mass events? And why do I get excited about a new pair of skis with a higher number?

It might not be the best extreme sports game, but it’s compelling. A jamboree of adrenaline and player progression with some suspect tunes. To put it another way: it might not sound like it, but trust me – it’s hip. ■

A QUIET PLACE

Three natural havens to explore in Zen Mode



ZION WHITE THRONE MOUNTAINS
Millions of years, laid bare as rock. Shred but show reverence.



GRAND TETON GRAND TETON
Look how utterly flipping high we are! Shred away the vertigo blues.



YOSEMITE HALF DOME MOUNTAIN
You’ll fall for days off this. Best have some shreddie brek first.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Extreme sports are made accessible in *Riders Republic* to the point of basic. It’s got a tin ear but a big heart.

71

LIKE A BOSS

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2022 ensures that heavy is the head that wears the crown

By Matt Killeen

When Ardiles returned to manage Spurs, he played to their strengths, putting all five world-class strikers in from the start. It was breath-taking... and a disaster. I find that devil-may-care, joie-de-vivre irresistible, and that's why I suck at football manager sims. I'm a fan, and the intricacies of the game are often too arcane. Just play better, I scream, occasionally out loud.

So, the *Football Manager* series scares me. There are menus and charts and significant obfuscation of its systems. It's big and clever, for the statistician and connoisseur whose dish is data. Sports Interactive's commitment to quality is a feast for those with the acumen to get to the bottom of the bowl.

Yet the tutorial system that made last year's game more beginner-friendly returns, fooling you into thinking you know what's going on. You start with the club philosophy, and this establishes the formation, instructions to the players, and training sessions for your staff to conduct. And, you're up and running. Other areas – transfers, scouting, staff recruitment, and so on – are introduced over a few in-game

weeks. You can do everything, or just delegate and follow advice from your backroom team. It's tempting to think you can do better, but you ignore them at your peril. I look in on the new Data Hub that provides professional quality visualisations and analyses. It's not for the dilettante. Ordering a report from my analytics team, they replied: here is a mysterious picture. Contained within, your failure. I was none the wiser, so ignored it.

However, the game unfolds at a snail's pace. Five hours in and I was still in the first week and I got to my first match after 13 hours, still unsure of how the team would perform in the league. I began to delegate huge swathes of admin and yet, real-world days were passing me

No one seems to tackle anyone when you're watching

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest entry in the football management simulator series

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Sports Interactive

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
GTX 980 Ti, Intel i5-4690K, 32GB RAM

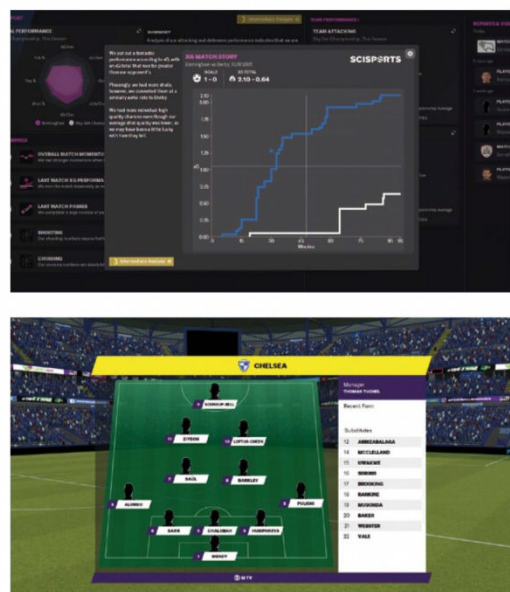
MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
footballmanager.com

by. And I kept clicking continue. It is compelling, like thirst is compelling.

MATCH MAKER

Last year, the new match animations were the moment that the veil was removed between what you thought was happening and what was actually going on. This year there's a whole new match engine. Player animation and the passage of play are all improved, but it's an incremental development. You need to interpret it like another graph. No one seems to tackle anyone when you're watching and the highlights seem somewhat random, making me question what I'm missing. Nevertheless, it's still thrilling. When the net bulges, the emotions are real.

The transfer market is tremendous. The most basic option gives you 20,000+ players and deadline day is edge-of-the-seat stuff. Getting good money for a player running down his contract, and yet lining up a replacement that I could only afford once the wantaway left-back had been sold, was like three points away to the league-leaders. The fans moaned on social media, but haters gonna hate.



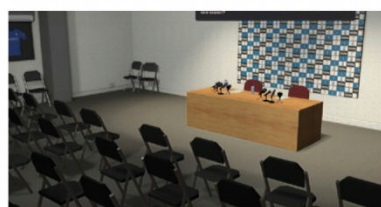
TOP: I get that this is good.

RIGHT: Top corner! We lost 6-3.





This is a beta version



TOP: It's pretty but I don't know what it means.

ABOVE: Shortly before Junior Price decided they hated me with a burning passion.

The illusion breaks down when interacting with the players. I congratulated the dressing room on a decent performance, and they were all instantly demotivated. A player complained that he hadn't been offered a new contract, but there was no option to tell him the club was broke and I couldn't offer him anything even though I wanted to.

A season into the game and my team played out of its skin one week, and sank into themselves the next, my job saved only by the club's low expectations. I had to accept that while the game was deep and smart, I just wasn't. Yet I was still looking at my inbox and the next press conference with journos who had come to hate my positivity. You can share that ennui with your friends with the fantasy draft system, because misery likes company.

If it were a team, *Football Manager 2022* would be Liverpool. No big signings, but there's already a star in every position and youth coming through, if you're patient enough. Likewise, it's more vocation, than game. It's a second job, but love what you do and you'll never work a day in your life. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Football Manager 2022, the veteran playmaker, is still banging them in and deserves that new contract.

85

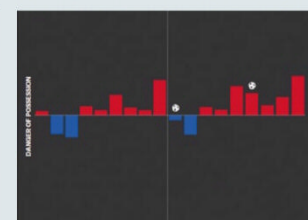


PAINTING 1,000 WORDS

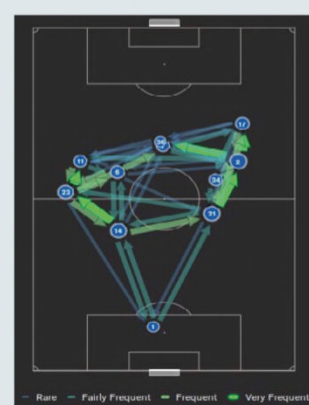
Data visualisations as teams...



RADAR
Leeds.
Beautiful but delicate.



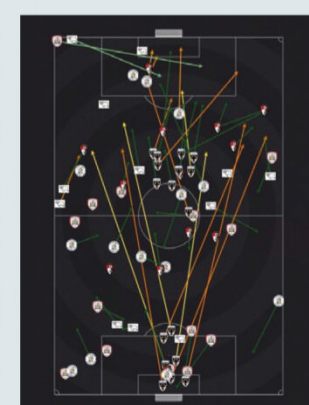
HISTOGRAM
West Ham United. Aims and graces, but it's just a bar chart.



PASS MAP
Arsenal. Round and round in circles.

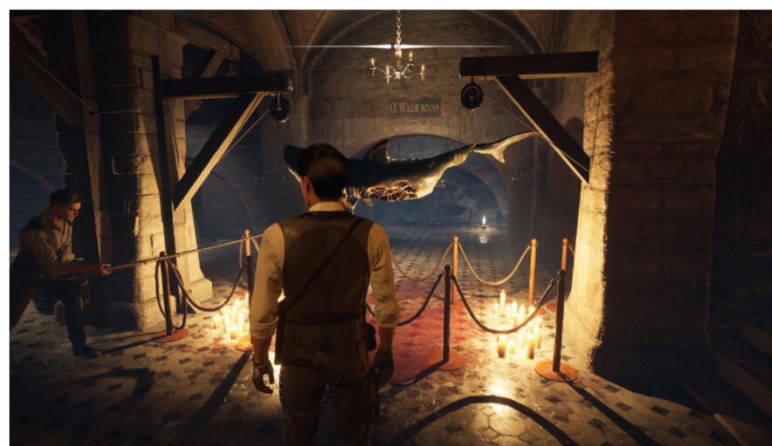


HEAT MAP
Everton. Patchy, few bright spots.



WHATEVER THIS IS
Spurs. Absolute confusion reigns here.

The number one hobby in Cordona is murder.

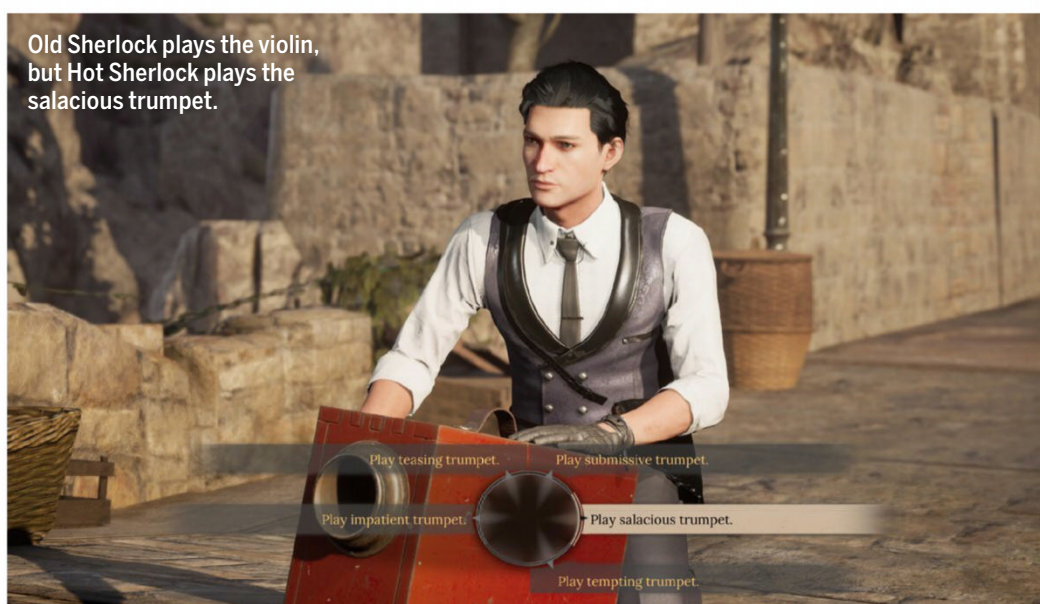


RIGHT: Another classic Sherlock Holmes disguise.

BELOW RIGHT: It's adorable when Sherlock tries to act tough.



Old Sherlock plays the violin, but Hot Sherlock plays the salacious trumpet.



A dynamic duo where nobody has to be Robin.

SUPER SLEUTH

SHERLOCK HOLMES: CHAPTER ONE is an ambitious sandbox with a younger detective

By Fraser Brown

Frogware's latest Sherlock game feels like the ultimate expression of the developer's ambition for its venerable sleuthing series – but also its strangest entry yet. It is nearly everything you could want from a game about the consulting detective, but also a few things that you could do without. It veers between greatness and absurdity, but if you've got an itch to solve some Victorian mysteries, there isn't a better salve.

Don't let the title fool you – this is not the first in a series of episodic games, but rather an origin story with a younger, hotter, weirder Sherlock. Instead of being stuck in gloomy

London, Sherlock's taken a trip to the sunny Mediterranean island of Cordona, where he lived as a child, to visit his mother's grave. Unshackled from so many of the conventions of a

Holmes mystery, *Chapter One* takes bold, surprising, and silly turns.

Sherlock's constant companion, Jon, is a sort of proto-Watson, and really exemplifies how *Chapter One* adapts Doyle's ancient character. Like Watson, Jon is a sounding board and confidant for Sherlock. But unlike the good doctor, he's a bit of a rogue, with a playful, cheeky streak and a more fraternal relationship with Sherlock. He's also entirely imaginary.

Jon's also another mystery to solve. He's been with Sherlock since childhood, a period of his life that's mostly a blank. Lost memories can be conjured up, however, filling the gaps in Sherlock's past with sketches superimposed onto the present. And while you're unravelling this story, at the heart of which lies the mystery of his mother's death, you're always a detective. The tools you use to solve crimes are the same ones you use to illuminate the past.

It dawned on me, somewhere between having visions, bantering with my sidekick, and putting crooks behind bars, that *Chapter One* is a superhero origin story specifically; one where he's still unsure of himself

and not in full control of his abilities. He's Batman with fewer muscles.

And like the Dark Knight, he's now joined the ranks of open world protagonists. Cordona is very far

from Arkham's Gotham, however. Instead, it's evocative of *LA Noire* and *Mafia*, where the cities are elaborate stages. For the most part, the island just lets you get on with the good stuff: solving cases.

Outside of the main story's five mysteries, there are more than 30 side cases, ranging from simple things like 'which drunk idiot stabbed that

Some great self-contained mysteries that are fun to solve

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world detective mystery with a young Sherlock

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Frogwares

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
sherlockholmes.one

other drunk idiot?' to chasing down an elephant who may have killed an important lead. The best cases, of course, are the bamboozlers that send you all over the city to research legal documents, interview suspects, solve riddles, and do a spot of chemical analysis, but there are some great self-contained mysteries that are just as fun to solve.

VIOLENT TENDENCIES

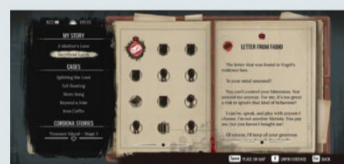
Nearly everything in the open world fits, but there's a glaring exception: fights. Inexplicably, you can burst into bandit lairs and kill (or subdue) everyone with your gun and environmental hazards. These are all repetitive, wave-based fights that lack any of the qualities that make decent action sequences, and they simply don't fit in at all. The lairs are optional, but fights crop up in cases from time to time, ruining the pace.

Thankfully, Sherlock still favours words over fights, running rings around everyone with his uncanny observations and revelations. His patter benefits from the strongest writing in the series, and he's even allowed to be occasionally funny. There are some stumbles, though, like the poor handling of a character's trans identity, or the solution to finding a hiding African refugee being 'ask any random Black person'. For a game with so much smarts, it can be very dumb.

Chapter One is imperfect and sometimes awkward, but I still found myself dangling on its hook, hungry for more crimes, which it's more than happy to offer. For all its welcome oddities, it still manages to stay focused on the important stuff. You're here to sleuth, and that's exactly what you'll get to do for 40 hours. ■

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

How the consulting detective solves crimes



CASEBOOK

This contains all the clues, testimony, and observations you've gathered, and helpfully directs you towards the next step in the investigation.



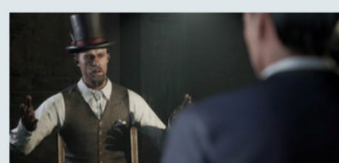
REENACTMENTS

You'll need to explore crime scenes for clues, after which you construct a mental recreation of the events. Watch out for multiple red herrings though.



MIND PALACE

Here you'll try to find connections between clues so you can form deductions, of which you'll once again be given multiple interpretations.



ACCUSATIONS

When you've settled on a deduction, you can accuse one of your suspects. This is where you get to bask in glory or find out you got it terribly, terribly wrong.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sherlock Holmes: *Chapter One* is full of riveting mysteries, but stuck with some truly awful and jarring combat.

80

SHUFFLE KNIGHT

VOICES OF CARDS: THE ISLAND DRAGON ROARS doesn't play its cards right

By Matthew Castle

Hot on the heels of *Inscription* (see p90), *Voice of Cards* is another card game where all is not as it seems. But where Daniel Mullins' feverish cabin battler deals you a hand of jokers and, for me, proved more than the sum of its parts, Square Enix has barely shuffled the deck. This is despite featuring creative input from Yoko Taro, he of *Nier* and papier-mâché head fame. Come to this expecting his galaxy (moon?) brained genre subversion and the biggest twist is how ploddingly basic it all is.

In truth it's less a card game than a game built from cards. It's a cardboard kingdom dealt by a disembodied game master who narrates the campaign. Characters, items, and buildings slide across the table as they come into play, while hundreds of cards depicting roads, grass, and seas are spread out to form an overworld for you to navigate tile-by-tile. If you've played *Inscription* or *Hand of Fate*, where fantasy lands are abstractly suggested by a few crude tokens, there is a certain wow factor to *Voice of Cards*' more total worldbuilding.

But the wow wears off. There's little variety or poetry in these building blocks, just acres of repeated grass and mountains, as sparse and basic as the 8-bit tilesets of a NES *Dragon Quest*. You can only paper over so much. Flashes of invention hint at the idea's potential – an ailing hero getting more dog-eared, a death represented as a violent tear – but these are rare. Compare it to *Thronebreaker*, the Gwent RPG, which magics avalanches, sieges and multi-limbed beasts from similarly static parts, and *Voice of Cards* seems... flat.

PLAYED OUT

Under its novelty art it's a straight JRPG, as traditional as they come. There's a hero and a dragon, and lots of villages and dungeons between the two. There are small soap operas in the former, endless random encounters in the latter. There is a

nutritionist obsessed with muscles, but that's the only real reminder that there's a weirdo at the wheel. If the writing is only gently amusing

throughout, it's helped by the delivery of the narrator. He's voiced in English by Todd Haberkorn with a pleasingly droll disdain for all the unfolding nonsense in the game.

The adventure doesn't outstay its welcome, either. The whole thing is over in ten hours, even if you take the time to explore every corner of the world map and uncover rare equipment. If anything, it could be shorter, by stripping the padding from two late game dungeons. Forcing us through floor after floor of

There's little variety or poetry in these building blocks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A traditional JRPG reskinned to resemble a card game

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Ti, AMD Ryzen 5 5600X 6-core processor, 16gb ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
voiceofcards.square-enix-games.com

surprise monster attacks is duff at the best of times, let alone when it's all rendered with the same dingy card tile. Again: why opt for an art style that amplifies repetition?

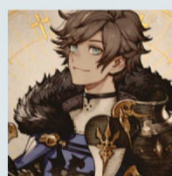
It doesn't help that *Voice of Cards* never finds its, well, voice in combat. It doesn't riff on card games or deck building as you might expect; it's yet more conservative JRPG thinking given a cute reskin: every hero has a deck of four moves, but is that really any different from selecting actions from the menu in, say, *Final Fantasy I*? You could make the case that building that 'deck' of attacks nods to some modern favourites, but I only had to swap in three moves during the whole campaign, which speaks to the redundancy of that.

Like so much here, fighting hints at ideas that could be more engaging. Like the way it decorates the battlefield with the ephemera of tabletop action. There are physical dice to roll to inflict status effects, and counters acting as mana. But because you're fundamentally playing the same hand of moves every turn, there's none of the spontaneity or improvisation that defines even the simplest collectible card game. The art of these things is how your brain seizes (or not) on the luck of the draw. This system asks practically nothing of you.

What a shame that so little of this takes flight. The current trend for leaning into videogaming's tabletop roots has proven such fertile ground – from *Inscription*'s onion-like layers to the tarot-fuelled brilliance of *Hand of Fate* (a game you'd do much better to discover in place of this) – that I'm sad that a singular talent like Taro couldn't do more with it. A real busted flush. ■

TARO CARDS

Four characters worthy of Yoko Taro



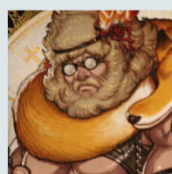
THE HERO
Notable for not being heroic. Yes, for once a hero who is

completely in it for themselves with craven dialogue choices for every occasion.



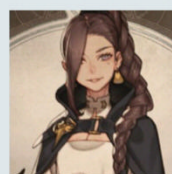
VILLAGE HEADMAN
A village where humans and monsters co-exist paints

a picture of hope, before this freak rocks up and spoils things with his 'colourful' diet.



AUREO
A powerfully hench nutritionist who casts a long, bulging

shadow over a town of wannabe bodybuilders. If anyone is getting worrying fanart, it's him.



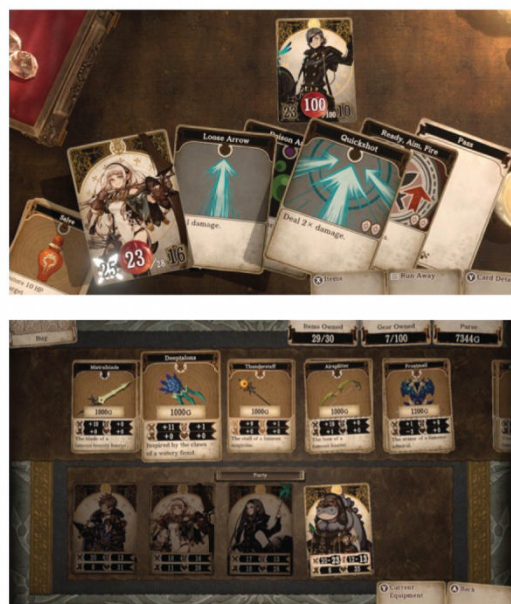
THE INNKEEPER
Inn visits are free, but every innkeeper justifies their

generosity with increasingly silly reasons. People will do anything for a good TripAdvisor write up.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Strip away the framing and *Voices of Cards* is a throwaway JRPG that unfortunately never quite finds its bite.

55



LEFT: Difficulty is so lax that bosses barely hit harder than grunts.



BIGGER FIELD

BATTLEFIELD 2042 refocuses the series on its founding principle: being huge

By Tyler Wilde

I wasn't sure whether or not *Battlefield 2042*'s randomly-appearing tornadoes could pick up vehicles until my squad's ATV was inhaled by one. As we tumbled skyward, I had to make a choice: ride it out in the gunner's seat or eject? I bailed. Our driver remained at the wheel, trusting that 'all-terrain' included the sky. Two seconds later the vehicle fell into a field like a bomb and incinerated him.

Even after two decades of sanding and streamlining, *Battlefield* can still surprise. The modern FPS scene is now stacked with big maps and whimsical vehicle physics, but *Battlefield* remains distinct from the milsims and battle royale games that have encircled it. With *Battlefield 2042*, DICE stands its ground as the king of military shenanigans more convincingly than it did with *Battlefield V*, ditching the singleplayer campaign to focus on the two pillars of the series: objective-based multiplayer and scale.

ROOM TO STRETCH

What was a 64-player game for 20 years is now a 128-player game, with proportionally bigger maps, putting *Battlefield* back in the category of games that push technical boundaries. The increased acreage isn't an across-the-board

improvement to the *Battlefield* experience, but if it's wrong to make a game bigger and more technically complicated without designing for all the possible consequences, then I don't want to be right.

The commitment to scale does come with regressions, such as cruder, less-destructible buildings, and large tracts of mud, grass, and sand between landmarks. The new vehicle call-in system makes it hard to

become truly stranded – on a cooldown, you can ask what I presume is an orbital parking garage to drop a vehicle for you – but sometimes I like going for a walk, anyway. Squad and vehicle spawning took a lot of the cardio out of the *Battlefield* series, and the downtime gives me a chance to take in the scale of the battle around me and feel some of the awe I felt when I first played *Battlefield 1942*.

What was a 64-player game for 20 years is now a 128-player game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A large-scale multiplayer shooter focused on vehicle combat and point capture

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
DICE

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/2ZjwUEC

There is some trend-chasing in *Battlefield 2042*, but it's handled better than it was last time, when the Firestorm battle royale mode was airdropped into *Battlefield V* after launch. From the start, *Battlefield 2042* includes Hazard Zone, a more coherent mode for four-player squads. It's similar to *Hunt: Showdown* in that multiple teams enter a map, compete to grab a thematic MacGuffin, and then try to get out alive, but the stakes are lower and there's 100% less bayou. It's plain by comparison, but once the tornado squad and I got the hang of seeking out respawn and vehicle call-ins and keeping each other alive with our specialist abilities – another of *Battlefield 2042*'s modernisations – we started to get into fun protracted battles with other squads, reviving and re-reviving each other as they did the same.

BACK TO BASICS

To the left of Hazard Zone on the main menu, All-Out Warfare encompasses *Battlefield*'s standard big-team warfare: the classic Conquest point capture mode and Breakthrough, the simple but fun attack-and-defend mode. And on the right side of the menu is Portal, a tool for creating and hosting custom game modes. It's no replacement for modding and custom dedicated servers, but those ships have sailed for big multiplayer games. Even *Left 4 Dead* successor *Back 4 Blood* is without mod support. As a compromise, Portal is a powerful middle ground that can even be used to whip up co-op experiences with friends and play *Battlefield 1942* Conquest on Battle of the Bulge. I hope every big live service shooter steals it and uses it.

There's a lot to experience in *Battlefield 2042*, but it feels like Swedish minimalism has won a victory here. Outside of the granular accessibility and graphics settings (it runs decently for a *Battlefield* game



ZONES VS BAYOVS VS EASTERN EUROPE

How Hazard Zone's premise compares to other modes



HAZARD ZONE

Collect cookbook-sized data drives from US and Russian spy satellites as they fall out of low orbit.

Verdict: 3/10

"The Cold War if everyone were stupider"



HUNT: SHOWDOWN

Track supernatural monsters across big, creepy bayous and banish them back to Hell... if you're lucky.

Verdict: 9/10

"There's a character named John Hunter"



ESCAPE FROM TARKOV

Private military companies and gangs of scavengers clash in a blockaded Eastern European city.

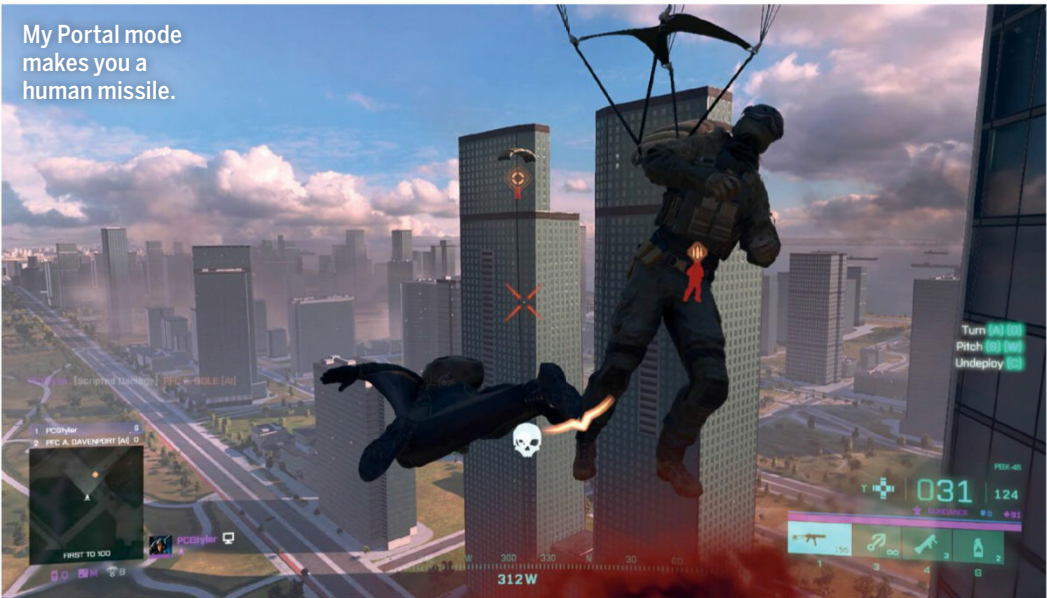
Verdict: 7/10

"I've been reading the wiki for three hours"

The bigger maps mean more room to maneuver.



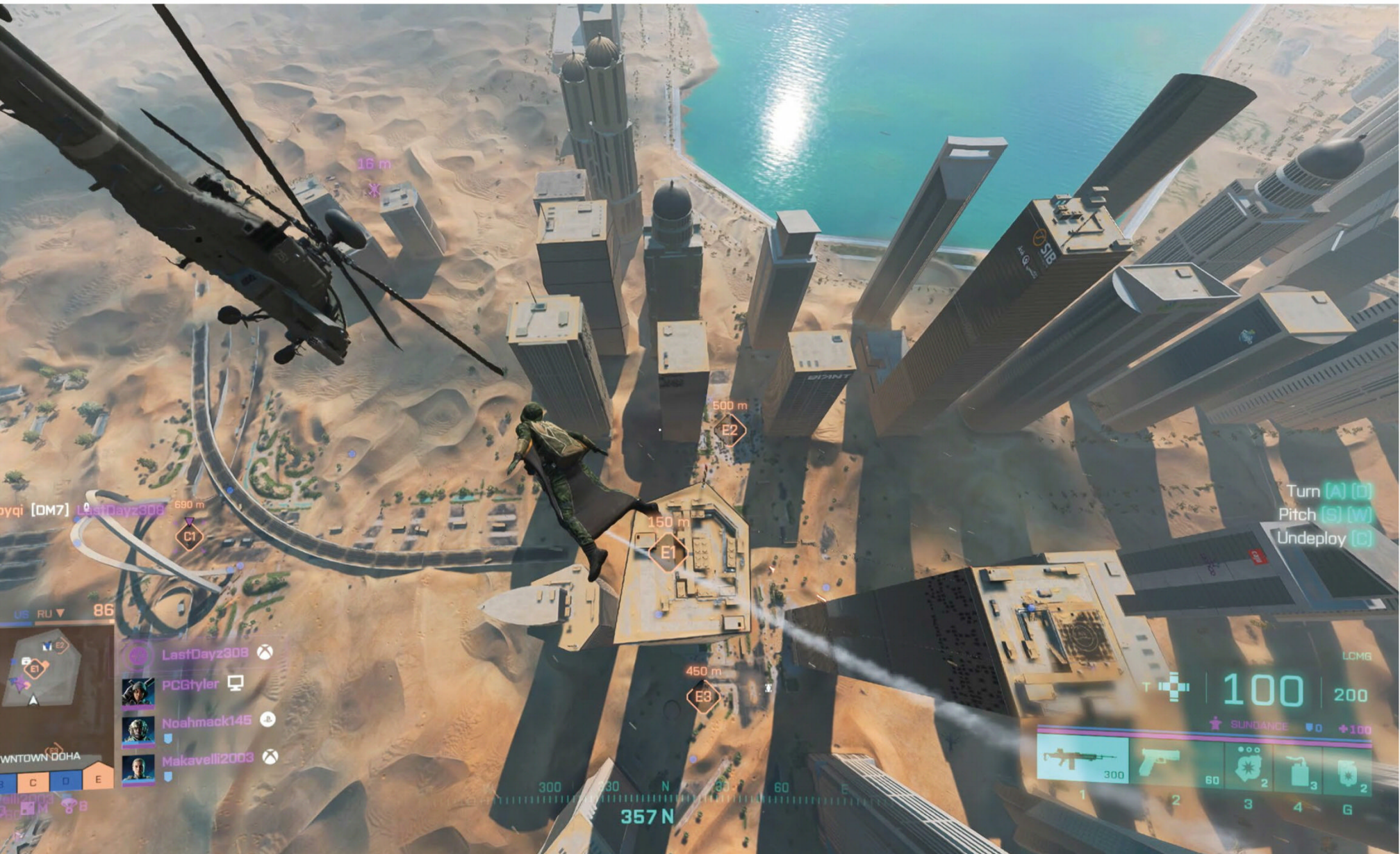
My Portal mode makes you a human missile.



LEFT: Hazard Zone's crashed satellites have a light *Fallout* vibe.

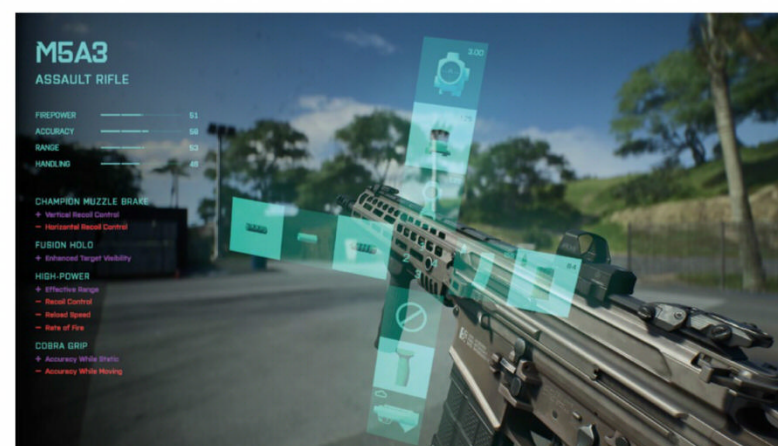


BELOW: This is just a corner of the map.

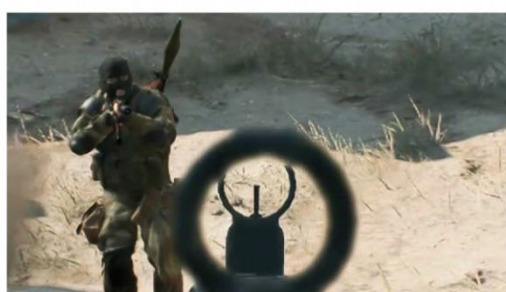




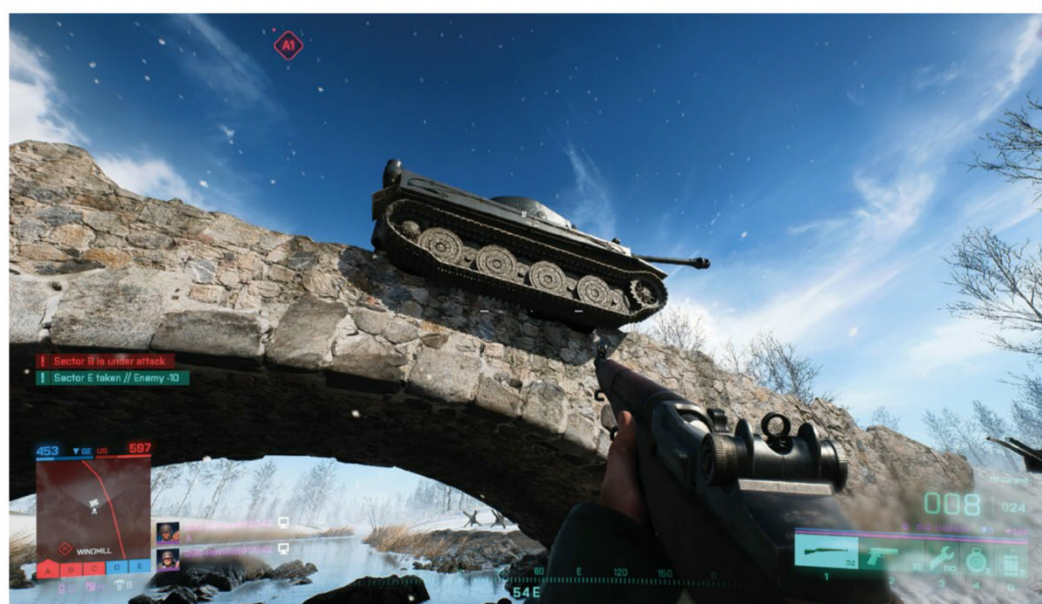
Just a regular day
in the life of a
No-Pat.



RIGHT: The old
*Battlefield Bad
Company 2* maps now
feel tiny by
comparison.



FAR RIGHT: I got a
tank stuck in Portal's
version of Battle of
the Bulge.



I missed waiting around
for jets to spawn in
Battlefield 3.



on my RTX 2070 Super), the menus feel sparse. There are fewer unlockable guns than usual, simpler progression systems, and no battle pass. The only extra EA is selling right now is a year-long pass that promises four new specialists who'll bring exclusive gadgets and perks to the battle. The menu and microtransaction hygiene is largely a good thing, although there are some annoying and disappointing omissions at launch. There's no stats page, for instance, and you can't tell if a teammate is coming to revive you when you're down.

GET TO THE POINTS

One thing hasn't changed: in Conquest, two 64-player teams compete to capture and hold control points the same way they have for 20 years, by standing near a flag until it changes colour. However, points can now appear in clusters of two or three, forming sectors that give some structure to the giant maps. I can easily spend an entire match duking it out in a single sector. Entirely separate war stories were playing out over at the rocket launch pad while I was repeatedly dying on a grassy hill, for all I knew. It's easy to lose track of the larger battle as I focus on one or two points, but that sense of being a small variable in a big, complex fight is part of what makes it enchanting.

Battlefield 2042 is best played in a four-person squad in a Discord voice channel (there's no built-in VOIP at launch), which I wouldn't have said about *Battlefield V*. We always seemed to end up doing different things in that game, but *2042*'s new specialist gadgets encourage teamwork by making us more useful to each other. So far, I like to bless my crew with intel from a spotting drone and transparent fortifications to hide behind. The decoupling of class from loadout also makes it easier to coordinate, because no one has to give up their favourite gun to heal, or spot, or carry rockets. The ammo capacity tuning feels just right, too, such that putting an ammo crate in one of my loadouts is useful enough to not feel like a downgrade next to toys like rocket launchers and AA missiles.

There are great characters and gadgets for solo players, too.

Sundance's wingsuit is a blast. They can leap out of helicopters or off of skyscrapers and manoeuvre in the air like a manta ray. It's not as satisfying as skiing in the *Tribes* games, which is essentially using a bug to accelerate forever, but if you master the physics of it you can keep them airborne for a long time. Mackay's grappling hook is useful in fewer situations, but

likewise increases the intrinsic fun of moving around skilfully. I once chucked a smoke grenade over a shipping crate, zipped onto the top of it, and then leapt into my smoke plume to emerge like a stage

magician, surprising a squad that could've sworn I'd been much further away just a few seconds ago.

I can easily spend an entire match duking it out in a single sector

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

Some of my complaints about *Battlefield 2042* can be addressed in Portal. It's a *Battlefield* potpourri that features official recreations of *Battlefield 1942* Conquest, *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* Rush, and *Battlefield 3* Conquest, with two remade maps per game and most of their guns, vehicles, and gadgets, as well as free-for-all and team deathmatch modes, plus servers running custom, player-made modes that mix and match maps, weaponry, and rules. You can turn off squad and vehicle

spawning, for example, or design an asymmetrical mode in which a team of *Battlefield 2042* soldiers fight *Battlefield 1942* soldiers, or one team is full of aggressive, knife-wielding bots that swarm toward the human players like zombies.

I'm frustrated by Portal restrictions that feel unnecessary, or like they exist to stop me from making a mode that's broken or unfun (I'll decide what the boundaries of FPS design are, thank you very much). For example, the visual logic editor, which opens many more possibilities than the built-in toggles and sliders, can only be used to modify free-for-all and team deathmatch modes, which don't contain any vehicles. You can't set up a mode that spawns ten players into jets for a free-for-all dogfight.

With the logic editor, I did manage to create crude hit boxes so that players can kill each other by colliding in the air, and then set it up so that they teleport back into the sky if they get too low. If they opt to use a sniper rifle from rooftops instead of being human missiles, they get on-screen messages declaring that they've violated the way of Bushido. So, Portal is powerful. I hope DICE loosens up some of the restrictions. If I can make a mode that crashes my PC, I'll consider that a feature, not a bug.

Taken together, All-Out Warfare, Hazard Zone, and Portal are a substantial videogame warfare toybox, enough to get me to reluctantly accept a newfangled scoreboard that focuses on squads more than individuals. The specialist abilities and Portal custom modes introduce new ways to play *Battlefield*, while some of the old ways don't feel the same, for better and worse. It's a modern *Battlefield* I want to get my *Forza Horizon* and *Rainbow Six Siege*-playing friends into. That might not happen until EA makes *Battlefield 2042* available on Xbox Game Pass, if it ever does, but that's fine. I'm happy to spend months trying to break the game with Portal's logic editor so that I have a library of nearly unplayable mutant FPS modes ready to go. ■

OLD-SCHOOL TACTICS

How to play Battlefield like a series veteran



PC GAMER VERDICT

Battlefield 2042 makes gusty changes to a series that needed them, and Portal fills it with possibilities for creativity.

80

SWORD AND BOARD

GLOOMHAVEN brilliantly translates the beloved board game to your PC screen

By Jon Bolding

Dungeon-crawling, campaign-adventuring Gloomhaven is surely the most widely-praised hobby board game of the past decade. The digital edition replicates the sprawling Gloomhaven campaign in its entirety, adds an entirely new second mode of play called Guildmaster, and networks them both with online multiplayer: an adaptation of the tabletop experience that leaves nothing behind. Nonetheless, occasional poor performance, the lack of key features like undo, and a healthy sprinkling of bugs hold *Gloomhaven* back.

Gloomhaven is at its heart a dungeon crawler, where framing stories read by a narrator sit alongside missions that take adventurers through a series of rooms and monsters to accomplish fairly simple objectives.

Everything in between quests is a choose-your-own-adventure, where decisions are made and give static bonuses or penalties to either the campaign as a whole or the next adventure. Both modes can be played by yourself controlling one to four adventurers, or with up to three others controlling one each.

Dungeons are card-driven tactical battles, some of the best you can find, that use a flexible system where you choose two cards each turn, then execute the action from the top of one card and the bottom of the other. Monsters play out simply, no complex AI here, but each round is planned in advance: you don't know what the monsters are going to do until you've locked in your options. Each card also has a numerical value, its initiative, which is when you act in the round. Weirdly, the AI often takes quite a while to determine its action after you move – odd, given that it's entirely deterministic behaviour.

So for a given round, your Tinkerer might pick their Stun Shot for initiative 20, which is a long-range stun attack on top and a four space move on the bottom, and their Flamethrower, an area of effect burn weapon on top and a shield aura on the bottom. That combo of two cards can come out to two very different

turns: a rush forward to roast some enemies, or a stunning shot to a tough enemy and a defensive buff to nearby allies. As you use cards they're discarded or burned.

Burned cards leave play, while most discarded cards eventually return to your hand. Run out of cards or health and you'll be taken out of the fight for the rest of the mission.

A single misplayed turn can set you on the path to doom

GLOOM RAIDERS

These fairly simple rules make fights into a slew of tough tactical choices and tight time limits in any given fight. Missions are hard, and even the base easy difficulty can and will beat tactics veterans into a pulp. A single misplayed turn can set you on the path to doom in some scenarios, as a tight timeline combines with a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based dungeon crawler based on a wildly successful board game

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Flaming Fowl

PUBLISHER
Asmodee Digital

REVIEWED ON
AMD FX-8350, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070 Ti, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3r1aPGo

limited number of cards to burn before you're out of the fight entirely. It's some of the best tactical play in gaming, and some of the most delightfully difficult choices you'll ever make in a dungeon crawler.

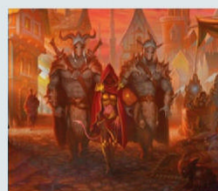
Bafflingly, *Gloomhaven* doesn't have an undo button. What would be simple fixes in the tabletop game (a wrong move, a declared ability, using an item) are impossible to take back. Misunderstanding the rules can be extremely frustrating, and with no comprehensive rule book in the menus I had to consult the tabletop rule book at times.

Nonetheless, the campaign is a blast with friends and far faster than a boxed game. Four hours at the table will get you a single dungeon, with its encounters before and after, played. Four hours in the digital campaign will let quick players plough through as many as three dungeons. If you feast on this kind of tactical play like I do, then *Gloomhaven's* ruggedly narrated adventures are exactly what you want from the genre. They're the simplest framework to play out a series of dungeon brawls, just engaging enough a framework to keep you wanting more night after night. You chart a fantasy epic, improving and building up the town of Gloomhaven as your adventurers level up, retire and get replaced by fresh young blood.

The new Guildmaster mode is just icing on the cake, as is the built-in level designer and modding support. The campaign is great co-operatively, while Guildmaster provides an experience made with solo play in mind. It's the thing all good tabletop adaptations should have: a reason why I'd play this rather than sit around a table. ■

INSIDE THE BOX

The world of tabletop Gloomhaven



GLOOMHAVEN
The original smash hit board game. Kickstarted in 2015, it was an enormous success and enjoyed almost universal critical acclaim.



JAWS OF THE LION
A standalone game designed as a more accessible path into *Gloomhaven*. It's smaller and cheaper with an easier ramp into the rules.

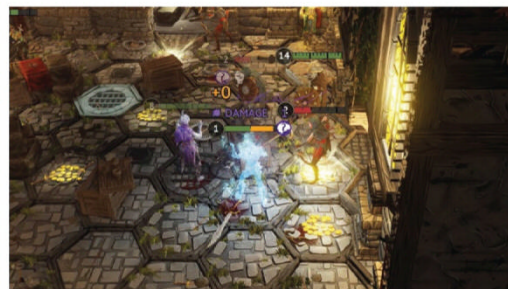


FROSTHAVEN
A hotly-anticipated sequel that's still in the works following another Kickstarter campaign. It moves the action to an icy wasteland.

PC GAMER VERDICT

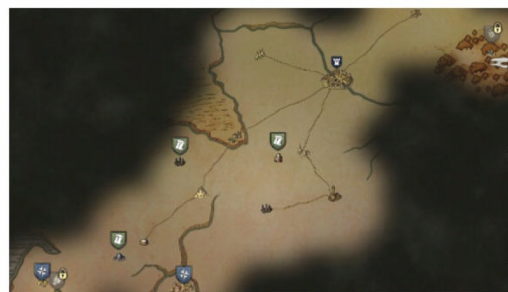
One of the best dungeon crawlers ever made is now on your PC and is brilliant, especially if you don't own a big table.

87



ABOVE: Every battle is its own tactical puzzle to figure out.

FAR LEFT: It's a faithful adaptation, but with some clever additions and changes.



ACT YOUR AGE

The unique civilisations are the stars, showing that less is more in **AGE OF EMPIRES IV**

By Robert Zak

With *Age of Empires II* still held up as a paragon of strategy games, you can see why new series developer Relic has decided to model *Age of Empires IV* on the second entry. The latest iteration strips away the complexities of *AoE III*, while adding welcome touches of its own. Chief among these are asymmetrical factions, which will elicit screams of bloody imbalance but count as the game's greatest success.

On the other hand, reverence to the past can be restricting, and I can't help but feel that *Age of Empires IV* could have been something more. While I respect Relic's decision to play things fairly safe, that should result in making what's already there really shine; polish those mosque minarets and Moscovian onion domes, pump up those population limits, let bodies fly with abandon upon impact from cannonballs and elephant heads.

Instead, there's a staid utilitarianism throughout much of *Age of Empires IV* – everything in it works much as it ever did, but without the flair that could have made it a grand celebration of that timeless *AoE* formula.

The campaigns follow the Normans, Mongols, Rus, and English

across three distinct eras each.

Interposed throughout each campaign are crisp documentary-like videos showing footage of significant castles, towns, landscapes, and

battlefields as they are today, superimposing hundreds of wireframe soldiers over them.

The documentary style permeates into the campaigns themselves, with most of the stories told through a narrator

rather than in-game characters. It keeps you at a distance from Genghis, Ivan the Terrible, and other movers, shakers of medieval history, which is disappointing given Relic's history of great RTS storytelling.

Regardless, the campaign throws up plenty of great set-pieces; there's the Battle of Xiangyang to establish Kublai Khan as Emperor of China, Dmitry Donskoy's power-shifting

It's Relic's bravest evolution of that precious *AoE* formula

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A new entry in the iconic historical real-time strategy series

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Relic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ageofempires.com

defeat of the Mongols at Kulikovo, and over in the west the Battle of Bremule to establish England as a regional power. These missions aren't easy either – on standard difficulty I found I had to quickly wrap my fingers around the new keyboard shortcuts to keep up.

But these sleek campaigns are just a foreword to the stories you'll be crafting on the Skirmish maps with the eight eclectic civs on offer. It's not a huge number, but the visual and strategic variety between these factions is one of the most significant evolutions in the series.

The Mongols are the biggest wildcard, capable of packing entire towns up into carts and relocating to anywhere on the map. For a simpler player like me, the Delhi Sultanate, with its war elephants and research system based around scholars, was a hoot, while the Rus accrue gold through hunting cabins and bounties.

Your path through the ages is further refined each time you advance an age, when you get to pick one of two civ-specific landmarks that will advance your empire in different directions.

WISE UP

A couple of the civs even have their own twists on age advancement. The Abbasids add wings onto their House of Wisdom instead of erecting new landmarks, while the Chinese can build two landmarks per age and found dynasties which grant bonuses. You can even 'build tall', with the Holy Roman Empire gaining bonuses based on buildings you place near their central structures.

While the core mechanics and loops will be familiar, the carefully designed civs and age-advancement choices offer an intricate new web of strategies and approaches to each match. It's Relic's bravest evolution of that precious *AoE* formula, and it really diversifies the game.

Upon starting a new game, returning players will immediately

THE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN

The DLC packs people want most, according to a fan poll



MESOAMERICA

It's got to be the Aztecs. Before the Spanish came and cocked everything up, there was a rich history of conquest and politics between the Aztec city-states, leading to the Aztec Triple Alliance.



SOUTH EUROPE

A vast region with plenty of intriguing powers like Castilian, Venice and Genoa, though Byzantium is probably a favourite with its influence and gloriously turbulent history during the medieval era.



NORTH EUROPE

Everyone loves the Vikings, but the Viking era ended by the period covered in *AoE IV*, and the 12th-14th centuries were a time of Christianisation, unity, and relative peace in the land.

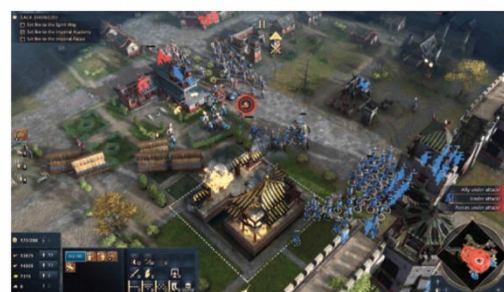
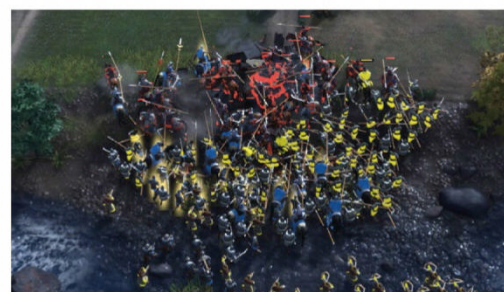
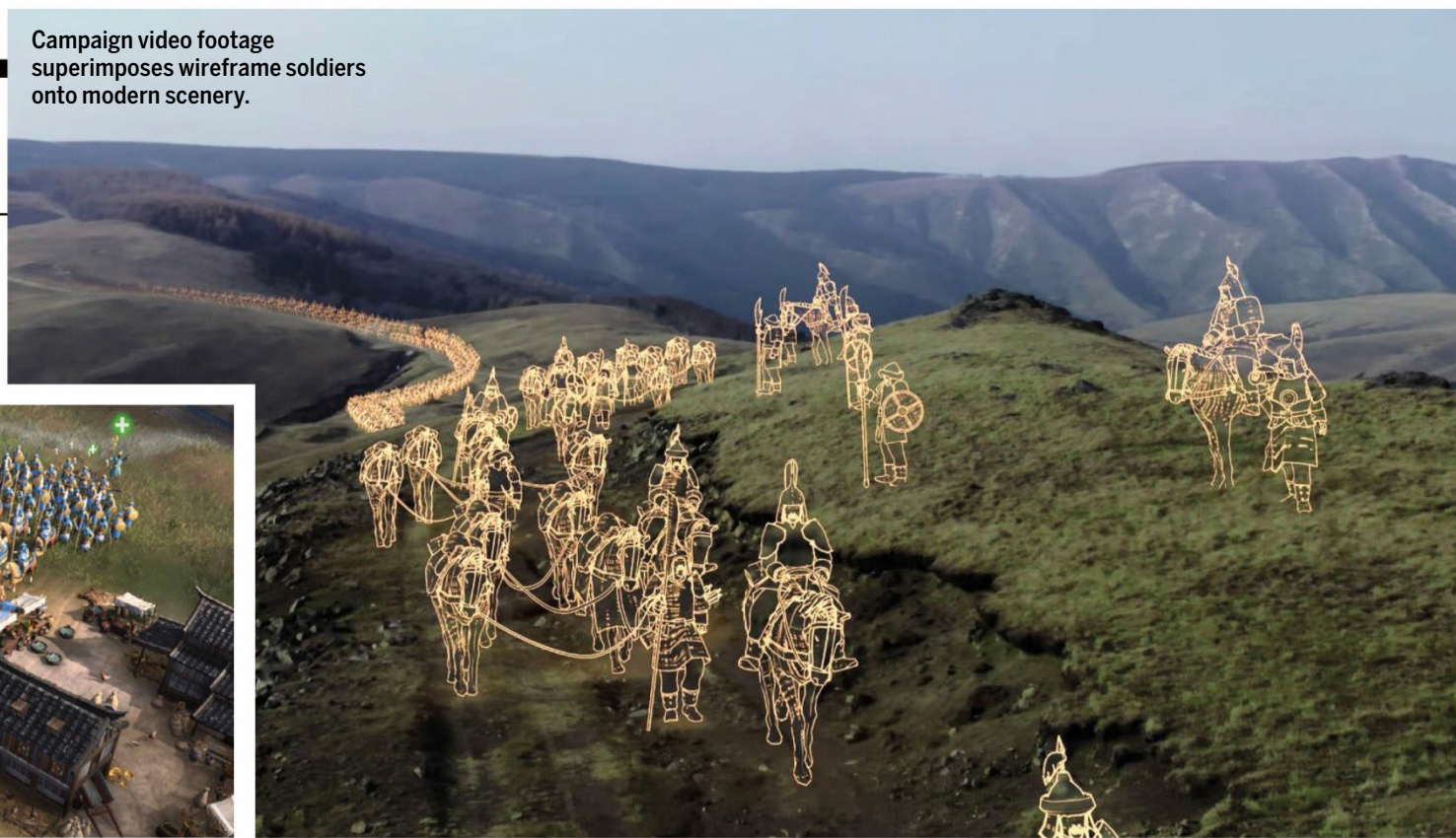


EASTERN EUROPE

Given that the Rus already feature, the next logical jump would be Poland, which began life as an nation in the tenth century. Sadly, this era predates the famous cavalry.



Campaign video footage superimposes wireframe soldiers onto modern scenery.



LEFT: Good luck replicating some of the large-scale campaign battles in Skirmish mode.

FAR LEFT: A Holy Roman battalion made up of Men-at-Arms and Landsknecht made quick work of the Chinese.



Piling in on the French city of Bayeux as Henry I in the Norman campaign.

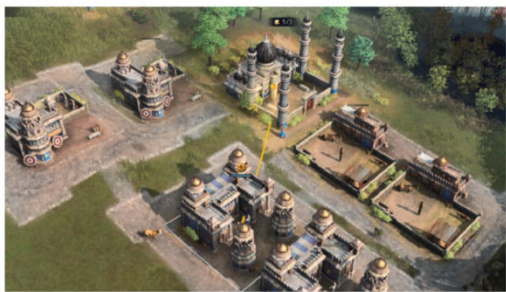


ABOVE: The plain terrain leaves a bit to be desired graphically.

RIGHT: Buildings could be better textured, but are completely distinct between factions.

FAR RIGHT: The crisp campaign videos do a good job of getting you up close to history.

BELOW: The ability to position units on walls offers some sneaky forward-settling opportunities.



» settle into the rhythm of resource-gathering, villager spamming, scouting, and forward-settling.

Victory conditions have been smoothed out to keep matches pacey, with military conquest now only requiring you to destroy an enemy's landmarks, the number of which increases with each age. For a religious victory, you can no longer take relics back to the safety of your base, but instead have to hold onto all the Sacred Sites on a map for ten minutes. Given their central locations on maps, this should encourage more feisty strategies than the sneaky relic-hoarding of AoEs past. But defensive-minded turtles needn't worry: the Wonder victory – whereby you build a late-game wonder and hold it for ten minutes – still exists.

Sieges feel much better thanks to the ability of infantry units to create battering rams and siege towers. It does wonders for the pacing that you no longer have to guide your siege equipment across an entire map.

Positioning soldiers on walls defensively, on the other hand, offers increased sightlines, and I shamelessly exploited this against the AI by building stone walls right up in their business, picking off key economic buildings with wall-mounted archers.

Finally, the ability to quickly rotate and position unit groups on an axis is great for battle micromanagement, letting you set up defensive positions or proper army formations more elegantly than before. These aren't huge changes, but they all help the combat feel that bit cleaner.

GROW UP

Despite a single 30-minute game of *Age of Empires* ostensibly spanning decades of technological progress, the series has never really evoked the sense of time passing; for all I knew from playing the original *AoE*, Rome really was built in a day.

Age of Empires IV addresses that dissonance with a few discerning touches. When you plonk down buildings, for instance, you see sped-up wireframe outlines of builders popping up at different points around the construction site – like old stop-motion footage of a skyscraper being erected. Each civ has its own soundtrack too, which

mixes in beautifully from the menu music and evolves throughout the ages. They're little things that increase the grandness of your journey through the ages, ironically in a game that actually seems to be a little bit faster than its predecessors.

And yet, for every thoughtful tweak and feature there's an equal and opposite misstep holding *Age of*

Empires IV back from greatness, because god forbid it outshines the immortal second entry.

Building and ground textures are on the washed-out side (and nope, I won't accept explanations that this is just part of the game's

more 'painterly' art style). Having gone back to *Age of Empires III: Definitive Edition* for comparison, I

found that not only are textures cleaner there, but the game is more secure about showing them off by letting you zoom in further.

Speaking of zoom, the combination of high camera angle and limited zoom-out makes for quite a narrow field of view. I'd love to have seen some kind of free camera functionality that lets you admire your town planning and get into the nitty-gritty of battles, or at least the option for an isometric perspective.

And battles still feel too polite, as units and cavalry charge each other only to stop just short of collision and start jabbing at each other with their pokey-sticks – it's kind of alarming that I can refer back to *Battle for Middle-Earth* as an example of

Battles never really reach the grand scale the trailers tease you with

'cavalry collisions done good'. Units in vague proximity to war elephants seem to drop dead (elephlatulence?), and there's no dynamism when castle walls fall out from under units or bombardments blow troops away. Similarly, leaving population caps at the traditional 200 means that battles never really reach the grand scale the trailers tease you with (unless orchestrated by the campaign).

But perhaps what I think of as anachronism others will think of as purism; a game zealously keeping to an excellent formula, right down to its strangely civil combat, and non-existent horse-turning animations that look a bit like a carousel pony rotating on its axis. The fact remains that the strong *AoE* loop, ever so slightly refined, is as compelling as ever, spruced up by a colourful roster of truly distinct civs.

Age of Empires IV has strong foundations to really grow into something, but it comes at a time when *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* is adding long-desired co-op campaigns and an ever-expanding library of historical battles. *Age of Empires IV* is missing both those things, and looks a little content-thin for a £50 game (conversely, it's an absolutely glorious Day One release on Xbox Game Pass).



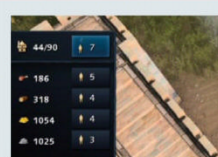
ONE FOOT IN THE PAST

Relic told us two months ago that they weren't looking to steal *AoE II*'s player base or place at the top of the series hierarchy, but rather give players an interesting new alternative. In this sense I guess they've succeeded, but it feels like with a bit more attention to detail (rather than, say, hours of globe-trotting documentary footage), they could have heralded a new *AoE* era rather than invoking a past one.

But in a series where a single game can take years, even decades, to evolve into its final form, the only thing really standing in the way of *Age of Empires IV*'s growth is the ongoing success of its predecessors. It offers enough new ideas amidst the sturdy old foundations to rank among them, though it's not yet ready to rule. ■

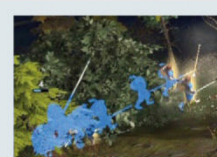
THE HOTTEST KEYS

These five shortcuts will serve you well



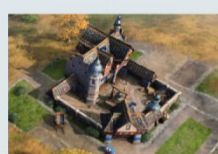
SELECT IDLE VILLAGERS (Ctrl+V)

Never let your villagers rest with this handy shortcut.



SELECT IDLE MILITARY (Ctrl+C)

Military units get scattered, so gather them up.



CYCLE TOWN CENTRES (H)

Jumping straight to town centres lets you easily navigate to nearby buildings.



GROUP UNITS (Ctrl+1-9)

Select a group of units by dragging your mouse or double-clicking.



FAST-BUILD (Q-R, A-F, Z-V)

To activate these, you'll need to press two hotkeys in a row (tricky, we know).

PC GAMER VERDICT

A worthy new entry in the series that's equal parts progressive and dated. It could've been far better if it was bolder.

77

THE BENDS

Bad news, sim racing rigs – **CIRCUIT SUPERSTARS** has arrived

By Phil Iwaniuk

In the time it takes to read this sentence, 17.3 game developers will have tried and failed to do what *Circuit Superstars* does: a mix of arcade and sim racing that feels enriched, not compromised, by both. Admittedly that was quite a long sentence. Still, the point stands. This may look like an unassuming title, and certainly it launched to little fanfare from publisher Square Enix, but it deserves the attention of any motorhead.

If you're a veteran of many a cross-legged *Micro Machines* campaign from the 16-bit days or, to be honest, if you've simply seen a screenshot and clocked the isometric camera, you've got a handle on how it feels to drive. What isn't evident until your first race is the sheer amount of subtlety baked into those adorable little vehicles. Going fast here is about picking out and committing to perfect racing lines, keeping all inputs smooth, and holding onto momentum like it's a fistful of James May's Marks & Spencer Autograph blazer after he wanders a bit too close during a Grand Tour filming.

Each day I've gone back to it, I've found some new way to unlock more speed. A micro-revelation that makes me want to go through every racing series – 12, since you ask – all over again. It is, I'm really surprised to discover, my favourite racing game for years.

Tracks rubber up as the laps go by, revealing thick, tar-like stripes of freshly laid tyre where extra grip and lap time can be found. Conversely, in events with tyre deg enabled, you'll lose pace alarmingly quickly unless you focus your driving style on modulated throttling and minimal steering under throttle or braking. Another part of your brain is still keeping an eye on fuel. In a game that looks like this, remember.

Original Fire finds a style of track design that works really well with both its camera perspective and vehicle physics, and in its 12 circuits

– with 18 total layout variations
– lies a long-term challenge. Mastering the lines well enough to perform respectably online, and fine-tuning that muscle memory in search of time trial leaderboard perfection.

The game itself is pretty laissez-faire about online racing conduct

PARTY FOUL

This being an indie studio's debut, you can forgive its pretty light online proposition. Still, it's a shame that

even with an online lobby feature that lets you buddy up as a party of four, you still have to race in public lobbies with up to eight strangers, and can't create your own event types from scratch. The community's

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An isometric racer with genuine sim chops

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Original Fire Games

PUBLISHER
Square Enix Collective

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 1080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/305NLv3

voiced its desire for more lobby controls since Early Access in March, so far to no avail.

That's not to say those strangers themselves are a bad lot, you understand. Partly motivated by the unforgiving collision physics and perhaps partly by the air of joviality inherent to a game about tiny vehicles racing through Aardman Animation sets, they're usually sporting – and about three seconds a lap quicker than you. It's just that full 12-person servers are prone to lag, which in the worst cases render the race pretty undrivable.

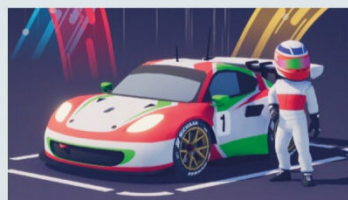
The game itself is pretty laissez-faire about online racing conduct. Brief time penalties are incurred when you cut corners, and you can see exactly how much cutting constitutes a penalty by observing the marker poles beyond the apexes. No penalties are handed out for contact, other than the time both parties lose for playing silly buggers and inevitably heading off track. It might not always feel fair, but which online racer does? It is, at least, clear and consistent in its race marshalling.

Oddly enough, there's no mid-series save function in offline races, so later series which feature five, ten+ lap races must be taken on in one session. It's not like asking someone to drive a season of *F1 2021* in one sitting, but it's an inconvenience all the same.

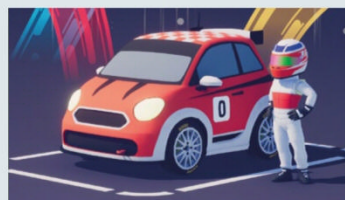
But despite those issues, if you ask me a real and formidable talent has emerged in Original Fire Games. Somehow, using some cute little cars, a camera perspective from the arcades of yesteryear, and surprising sim touches, it makes all-out racing sims feel a bit like doing a yearly tax return by comparison. ■

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIAS

Circuit Superstars' finest mini motors



PANTHER
A GT car that seems to be smiling effusively.



PICCINO
Say hello to my little friend. It's named Piccino.



STORM
For expert handlers of tiny cars only.

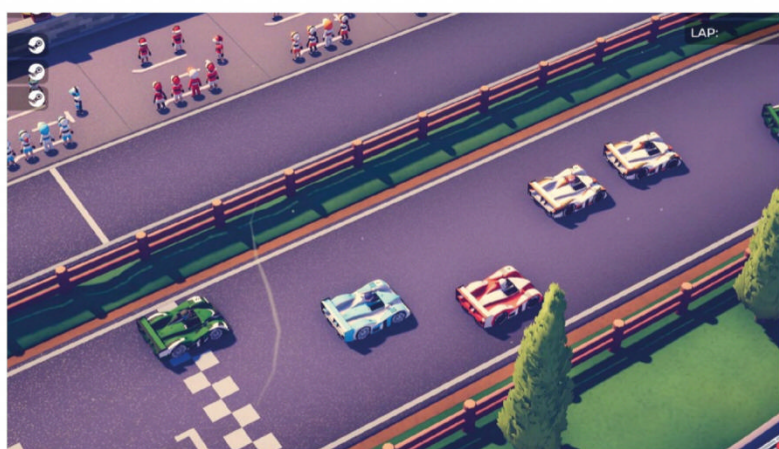


OSPREY
Driven by only the most daring borrowers of the '60s.

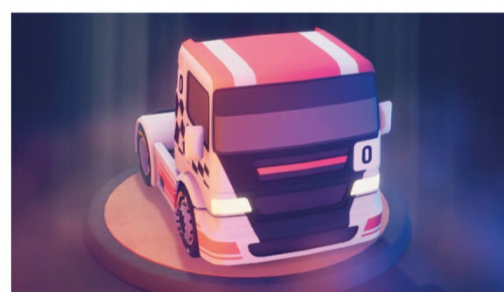
PC GAMER VERDICT

Please make more games, Original Fire. Show the rest of the genre how sim meets arcade is done.

85



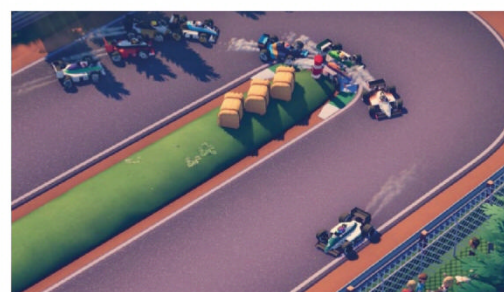
These wholesome podium scenes reward a series victory.



ABOVE: I... may have missed my pit box just by a hair.

LEFT: The more you drive, the more customisation options unlock.

BOTTOM: Listen, third out of four is actually very respectable.



MOONAGE DAYDREAM

MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY is charming, heartwarming, and beset by issues

By Luke Winkie

I did not expect to root for *Guardians of the Galaxy* this much. The game was weighed down by so many stagnant vibes during its pre-release cycle. The shadow of *Marvel's Avengers*, Square Enix's 2020 attempt to transmute the total media superiority of the MCU into a living co-op videogame, loomed particularly large. That game's cast of Hollywood facsimiles left customers ice cold, and while the core narrative was solid, nobody enjoyed the meaningless currency grind.

Guardians comes from the same publisher and appears to be made of the same stock, except that this time, it's a singleplayer only campaign and the player is restricted to the least interesting member of the troupe, Star-Lord. There is a pervasive focus-tested coldness that corrodes so many products that bear the Marvel name in 2021, and I wasn't optimistic that Eidos Montreal would be capable of overcoming the taint.

That is until I solved a puzzle involving a psychedelic space llama who I needed to coax into chewing up some wires on the ship. The beast was either enchanted or repelled by each crewmember's singing voice – he'd come closer to Star-Lord's melody, run away from Rocket Raccoon's, and so on – so we all took turns belting out Bobby McFerrin's Don't Worry Be Happy until our mercurial llama was finally in place.

Guardians is full of sequences that capture the odder, funnier, lighter side of Marvel's cosmic expanse. I ran into a Soviet test-flight golden retriever blessed with celestial

hyper-intelligence, and in a moment of weakness, he admitted to me how much he missed his former puny dog-intellect, those endless afternoons chasing tennis balls in the front lawn. There's a fourth-wall-breaking

left-hook, taken right out of the *Arkham* playbook, tied to an amazing twist that caught me hilariously off-guard. Hell, deep into the game's final acts, I watched as the permanently chaffed Rocket Raccoon faced his one lingering trauma thanks to the encouragement and support of his teammates. The scene worked as a better emotional payoff than anything I've seen the character do on film. *Guardians of the Galaxy* has its heart in the right place... if only

It's full of sequences that capture the funnier, lighter side of Marvel

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A singleplayer space adventure full of moral choices

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Eidos Montreal

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, GeForce GTX 1070, Intel Core i7-9700 CPU, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/30MI7yJ

the game itself weren't constantly sabotaging those efforts with exhausting technical jank.

DRAX, MURDERER

Like *Avengers* before it, *Guardians of the Galaxy* is steeped deep in the character-action tradition. You wrest control of Star-Lord, as I mentioned earlier, and unload an endless stream of photon beams at the toothy beasties, corrupt interplanetary cops and deranged cult leaders that stand in your way. A bar on the left side of the screen fills up as the player deals damage, punctuated with Marvel-fied versions of those vintage *Devil May Cry* descriptors – “Marvelous!” “Uncanny!” The remaining Guardians come into play with your unlockable special power rolodex. I could ask Groot to bind my enemies to the floor with his roots, or summon up Drax for an earth-shattering ground pound. But outside of those instances, your fellow superheroes are relegated to the nameless faces that tend to populate *Call of Duty* levels, offering the faint image of warfighting solidarity, without actually doing anything all that productive.

It gets the job done. The combat isn't where *Guardians of the Galaxy* shines, but it is both flashy enough and simple enough to sustain some of the more active portions of the plot. Strangely, I found that the villain-fighting got more engaging the closer I came to the game's conclusion. In the beginning, armed with only a pair of pea-shooters and a handful of basic attacks, *Guardians* is a shooting gallery with no pulse. But when you're popping off multiple cooldowns at once and enjoying a fully optimised arsenal, the design gets close to that overwhelming, splash-panel, polychromatic eye candy that is so often prioritised in the films. Laser beams, bombs, swords, and Drax flying in off the top rope like a punishing *Marvel vs Capcom* assist.

TOP OF THE POPS

The objective, scientific ranking of the *Guardians of the Galaxy*



1

DRAX

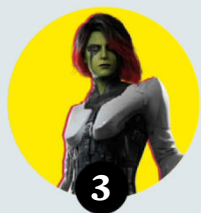
Sure, he doesn't get jokes and he's animated only by grief, but he'll never let you down.



2

GROOT

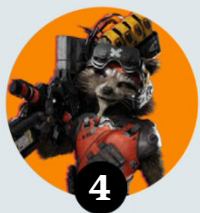
It's a giant tree with restorative powers and super-strength. Great in a scrap, if bad at conversation.



3

GAMORA

A powerful ally, but perhaps a little quick to threaten our lives over every single perceived slight.



4

ROCKET RACCOON

Look man, I get that you've had a hard life, but do you always need to be a dick?

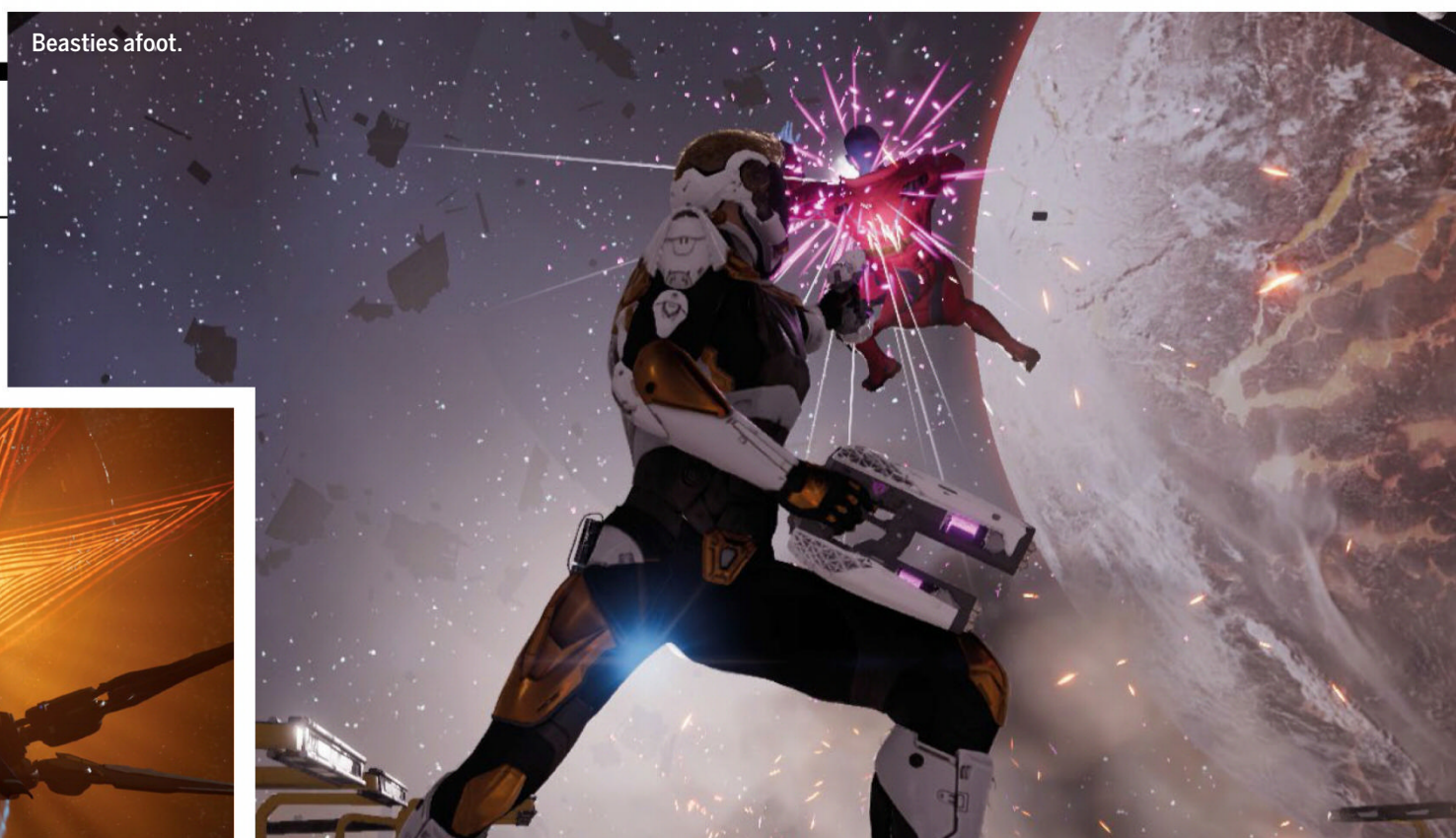


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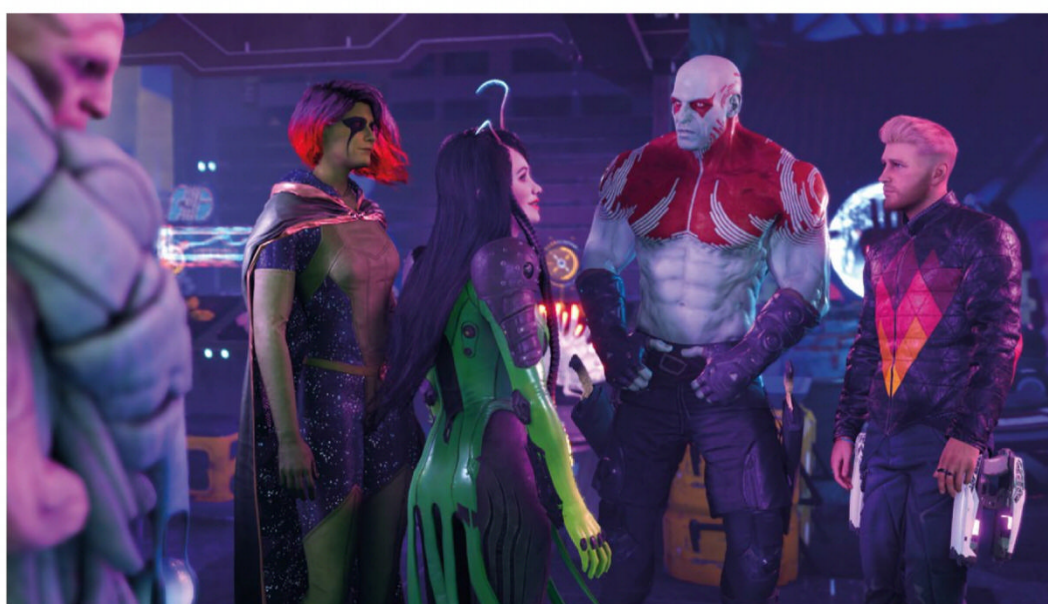
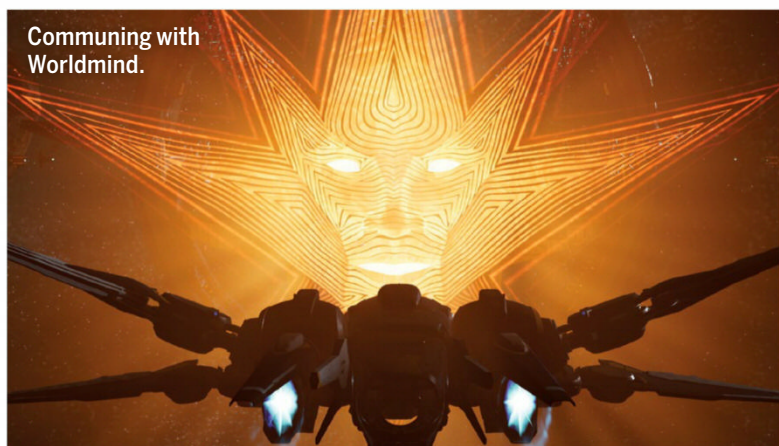
STAR-LORD

This game would be ten percent better if Star-Lord was eaten by the Dune worm in the first act.

Beasties afoot.



Communing with Worldmind.

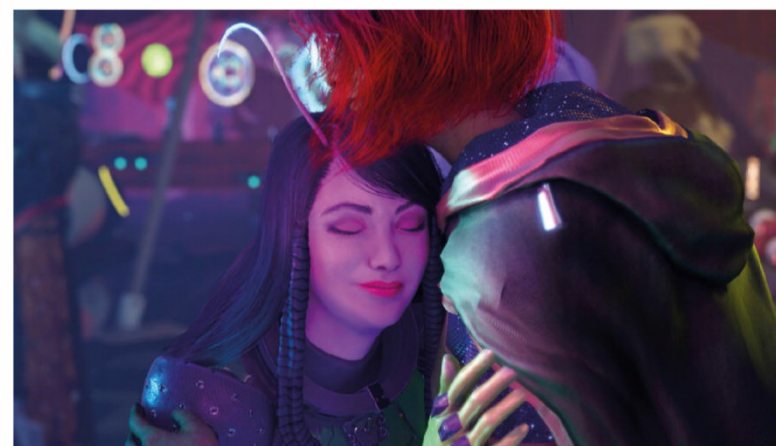


FAR LEFT: Some familiar faces pop up along the way.

LEFT: Rocket might be a malcontent, but he's our malcontent.

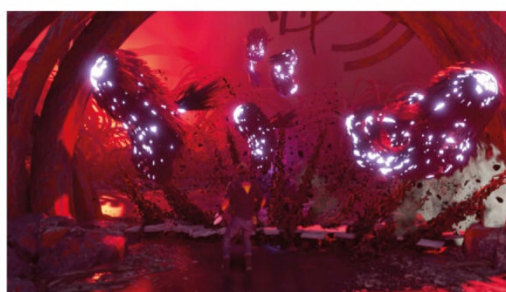


Particle effects abound!



ABOVE: Star-Lord springs into action.

RIGHT: Some of the visuals are genuinely stunning.



There's plenty of environmental objects to blow up.



» One of the best features is the Huddle Up ability. Every once in a while you can call the team together, offer words of encouragement, and re-enter the fray with a damage buff cued to an '80s classic pulled from the game's trove of licensed material.

CULT HIT

The story here is centred around the usual universe-threatening Marvel gamut. There's some sort of hyper-religious stellar church corrupting the minds of the Andromeda Galaxy. Our motley crew is here to stop it, even as the odds continue to pile up against us. The Guardians might be a roving batch of greedy malcontents, but at least they've got a heart of gold. The broad-strokes didn't interest me much, but *Guardians* does a good job integrating the uber-high stakes into the cloistered anxieties of the heroes themselves. One of the cult's first victims? A girl who may or may not be Star-Lord's illegitimate child. How could a bunch of daffy venerated nerds ever seduce a chiseled meathead like Drax? Maybe by introducing the memories of his dead wife and daughter. All of this is buttressed by *Guardians'* moral choice infrastructure, which is clearly ripped directly from the Telltale convention. Along the way, Star-Lord has a hand in shaping the team's plans and posture, which have a light impact on the narrative. In the interstitial periods between missions, you can chop it up with the team on the ship, akin to those elliptical therapy sessions hosted by Commander Shepard on the Normandy. The writers here are clearly bound by Marvel orthodoxy, but it was still cool to see some of their own flourishes. (Gamora, for instance, is a huge action figure collector in this timeline.)

I should reiterate again that *Guardians of the Galaxy* is very much singleplayer and plot-focused. You move from chapter to chapter, disembarking on all sorts of famous Marvel locales, fighting through beautiful corridors that are occasionally broken up by some heavy-duty cutscenes. That makes the game a bit of a dinosaur, in a good way. A number of the attack unlocks are tied to certain wrinkles in the

dramatic arc rather than meeting a certain threshold of resources. You will spend precisely zero minutes staring at talent trees or defensive integers a la Kratos from *God of War*. When I saw that the characters all had their own suite of greyed-out costumes, I thought for sure they were going to be cinched by some sort of depressing meta-grind and an

in-game real money store. Nope, you just find those stashed away in the remote corners of the geography as a reward for taking the time to explore. It brings to mind the storytelling conventions of the

Uncharted and *God of War* series. Eidos doesn't punch at quite that weight, but it does enough here to be mentioned alongside their influences.

SPACE BUGS

That brings me to the core, debilitating issue with *Guardians*. This game is frequently, flagrantly broken. At one point I ran into three different crashes within a single hour of play. One was a bizarre soft-lock, the other two were straight-up hardcore freezes that required an alt-F4 to escape. The first boss I fought stopped moving a few times; it was stuck in stasis as I blasted away at its tentacles, scoring oodles of cheap damage. The game routinely believed Star-Lord had fallen down a phantom pit, and it dutifully

teleported me back to some sort of crucible of danger completely haphazardly. I needed to reload checkpoints in order to get certain progression choke-points to trigger.

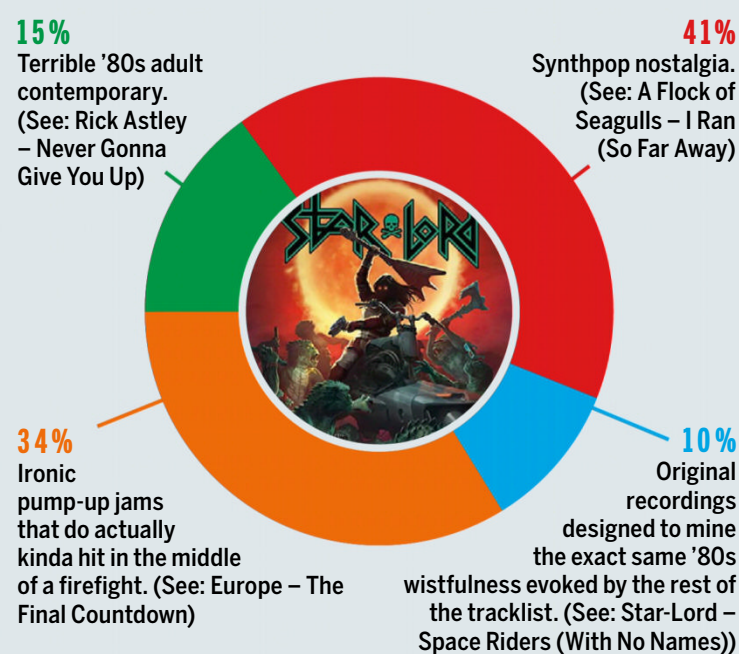
It's bad, and Square Enix knows it. When I first downloaded my review code for *Guardians*, it came in at an insane 150GB size. A few days later, the company issued a new version that reduced the file size and promised greater stability. The crashes I described earlier all occurred after that patch. Another patch came after and more will come, but the odds that every physics anomaly and crash will be swept up within days of launch are slim.

This makes *Guardians of the Galaxy* a difficult game to recommend right now. Something clearly went awry during development, because it's weird for a singleplayer, linear game to have so many bizarre performance issues. This is something we expect in the high entropy of Tamriel, not the series of combat arenas and connective tissue that makes up *Guardians*. The closest analogue I can think of is *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*; another Disney property that shipped with a well-hewn narrative, some neat combat tricks, and a boatload of sundering technical hangups. Unfortunately, I don't think *Guardians of the Galaxy* is quite good enough to offset those problems the way Respawn did.

But then I think back to a sequence early on, where Star-Lord runs into an old drinking buddy named Lipless at a slimy dive bar in Knowhere. The two of you fumble through a turgid hair-metal anthem that, apparently, the hero was too blacked-out to remember writing. The player chooses each line in the song, and Star-Lord does his best to half-mumble the lyrics to stay on Lipless' good side. *Guardians of the Galaxy* wants to be a technicolor, star-faring adventure worthy of the multimedia powerhouse that shares its namesake. It accomplishes that with its story, its voice cast, and its wonderfully cheeky '80s pastiche. If only the technical side could better keep up with those ambitions. ■

HIT FACTORY

The anatomy of a Guardians soundtrack



PC GAMER VERDICT

When you're not forced to reload your checkpoint after a game-breaking bug, *Guardians* is a surprisingly good time.

70

CRUISE CONTROL

FORZA HORIZON 5 is more of the same, and that's OK

By Phil Savage

After being airdropped from a cargo plane in an AMG One, I arrive at the festival site to a fanfare. The organisers are delighted – their ‘superstar’ is finally here – and to celebrate they offer me a choice of starting car. I leave the site and head to my first race in a Corvette Stingray Coupe. This isn't how racing games are supposed to start. I should be battling for wins in some hatchback. Instead, I'm being handed a 500 horsepower supercar.

Forza Horizon 5 doesn't need to do what other racing games would do. It just needs to be a *Forza Horizon* game. It's a series with no serious rival, and as such it feels unchallenged. It's not being forced to reinvent the wheel, and so it's content to just hone and refine – to be the best *Forza Horizon* it can be.

If you have played any previous *Forza Horizon* games you already know what this means. A map filled with more icons than a Ubisoft open world, each denoting a race event, a PR stunt, a rumour about some vintage car, or a series of challenges organised into a handful of stories. As you win races and complete events, you're bombarded with rewards. You earn accolades – mini achievements that act as *Forza Horizon 5*'s career progression system – some of which reward new cars and new phrases to spam in chat. You earn wheelspins that can drop cars, cash and clothes.

The rewards come so thick and fast, that collecting new cars is more about broadening your options than straight progression. You'll likely get an S2 class car – among the fastest – in your first hours. But, thanks to the restrictions present in the seasonal playlist, you're encouraged to chase different makes and models.

The seasonal playlist is the heart of *Forza Horizon 5*'s live service. Each week takes place in a new season and offers a variety of events and challenges, usually with restrictions to class, type, and difficulty. As such, it succeeds by forcing you out of your

comfort zone, and making you think about how to overcome the restrictions it presents – giving you reasons to think about your garage and what fits your next goal.

Inevitably as I play, I have a big, dumb grin on my face

MEXICAN WAVE

You'll notice at this point that I've not talked about anything new to *Forza Horizon 5*. There's a reason for that. Yes, there's a new event type – an ‘expedition’ – used to

unlock the outposts that contain different racing disciplines. You go to a new area, complete some objectives and your map fills up with new road, street, dirt or cross country races. Even so, calling this a new feature may be overstating the point. With so many event types already, any slight variation struggles to stand out.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A ridiculous car playground masquerading as an open world racing game

EXPECT TO PAY
£50, free on Game Pass

DEVELOPER
Playground Games

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080Ti, 32GB RAM, Ryzen 7 3700X

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3FxV0ul

Really, then, the major new feature of *Forza Horizon 5* is, simply, its setting. Mexico is more varied and vibrant than *Forza Horizon 4*'s UK – with rainforests, towns, deserts, and many, many cacti to bash into. The weather is more interesting too.

Throughout, the game's characters reference Mexican culture and history, although it's all filtered through the series' relentless positivity. It's hard to think of its world as a real place, not because it's a pick-and-mix truncation of real locations, but because it exists in a universe where bad things don't happen. Everyone is loving life all of the time – the festival is a constant party, where destruction means skill chains and harsh vibes don't exist.

This is *Forza Horizon*'s whole deal, though, and while I might roll my eyes at the dialogue, I can't pretend I don't get swept up in the atmosphere. Inevitably as I play, I have a big, dumb grin on my face. It's just that kind of game. Similarly, I can't really criticise it for not innovating the series – making big, sweeping changes for the sake of it feeling more different. It's easy to forget given how effortless everything feels, but the sheer detail of its environments and the level of craft evident in each of its over 500 cars is astounding.

This is what happens when a series gets to exist without any serious competition. It gets to focus on and perfect the things it's most interested in. While I'd love to know what *Forza Horizon* would look like if it had any serious rivals forcing it towards greater innovation, I'll happily make do with playing the most polished and confident *Forza Horizon* game made to date. ■

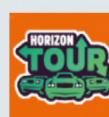
AFTERPARTY

Forza Horizon 5's multiplayer explained



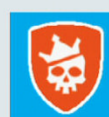
OPEN RACING
Weirdness rating: Low

It's a race, just with real people. Pretty simple, really, but there's plenty of variety between the different cars, classes and terrain types.



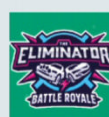
HORIZON TOUR
Weirdness rating: Still low

Team up to take on an AI team in a series of races. The better each racer on your team places, the more points you earn.



PLAYGROUND GAMES
Weirdness rating: Slightly higher

FPS standards like capture the flag and king of the hill, but with cars. In my experience, these are often wildly unbalanced.



ELIMINATOR
Weirdness rating: Off the charts

It's battle royale, but with cars. It's got loot drops that give you better cars, a slowly closing ring and eliminations. Extremely bizarre.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The series gets a new, lush setting, but otherwise is content to simply fine-tune an already winning formula.

90



Driving down a big volcano is as much fun as it looks.



The setting sure does look the part.



ABOVE: Live out your fantasy of crashing some of the world's most expensive cars.

LEFT: *Forza Horizon 5* has no chill.



BELOW: Street races are dangerous. Everyone here should go to jail.



THE GOOD PLACE

It's a dog's (and cat's) life in **THE GOOD LIFE**

By Tom Sykes

You've probably heard of SWERY. Or if you haven't, you know his magnum opus, *Deadly Premonition*, of which *The Good Life* is a kindred spirit. Both involve a murder in a small town, but while the former leans into detective work and survival horror, *The Good Life* is a life sim... sorta. It also feels like an RPG, but with (almost) no combat and an abundance of menial quests, which have you trudging the mysterious town of Rainy Woods.

During every full moon, its residents transform into cats and dogs – a power you soon snaffle for yourself. But while they remain moon-bound, you can change forms whenever you like, leaping over walls and onto rooftops as a cat, or following scents and, er, peeing on stuff in your faster canine form. You're Naomi Hayward, by the way: an American photojournalist who has come to town to work off an eye-watering £30,000,000 debt. She's selfish, rude and frequently the butt of the game's many jokes. She'd make a great sitcom character, as her dignity is eroded at every available opportunity.

The main way the game does this is with its smorgasbord of side quests. These are the sort of lesser RPG quests you'd Hoover up on a notice board and then tick off over an afternoon, but they're enlivened by a cast of colourful characters and a well-realised open world, whether you explore it on foot, on the back of a sheep, or on your own four paws.

DOG'S BODY

Quests often utilise your transformative abilities, but also Naomi's camera, which can be used to generate #content for an Instagram-style social media platform. This is the main way you earn money in the game: by taking photos that fit with the trending hashtags. The more popular the photo, the more money will trickle into your account. As well as being engaging in its own right, this system encourages engaging with the world

around you, and noticing the details of the game's vividly British setting.

With its misty, sheep-laden fields, ancient cairns, and cosy pub interiors, Rainy Woods certainly looks the part, while the story delves surprisingly deep into British folklore. Mythological titbits are mashed together with sci-fi elements, fourth wall jokes, and plain bonkers moments. In other words, don't take the mysteries seriously.

I learned to just roll with it and embrace the (mostly funny) nonsense

I learned to just roll with it and embrace the (mostly funny) nonsense, which culminates in an ending that takes it to another level.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A life sim/mystery/adventure game set in a town whose residents transform into cats and dogs

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
White Owls Inc

PUBLISHER
Playism

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
whiteowls.co.jp

If you go in expecting concrete explanations to the town's myriad mysteries, you may be disappointed, but on a thematic and emotional level, I found the ending satisfying.

But as well as a murder mystery, I said this was a life sim, didn't I? Sadly, this element too is a bit insubstantial: just one more ingredient in *The Good Life* casserole. You can buy decorations for your garden, plant and harvest veggies for no real benefit, and pick from a handful of pre-defined styles for your house. You'll also need to eat (often) and sleep (oddly very little). But you can't really customise your home, or form relationships with the townsfolk.

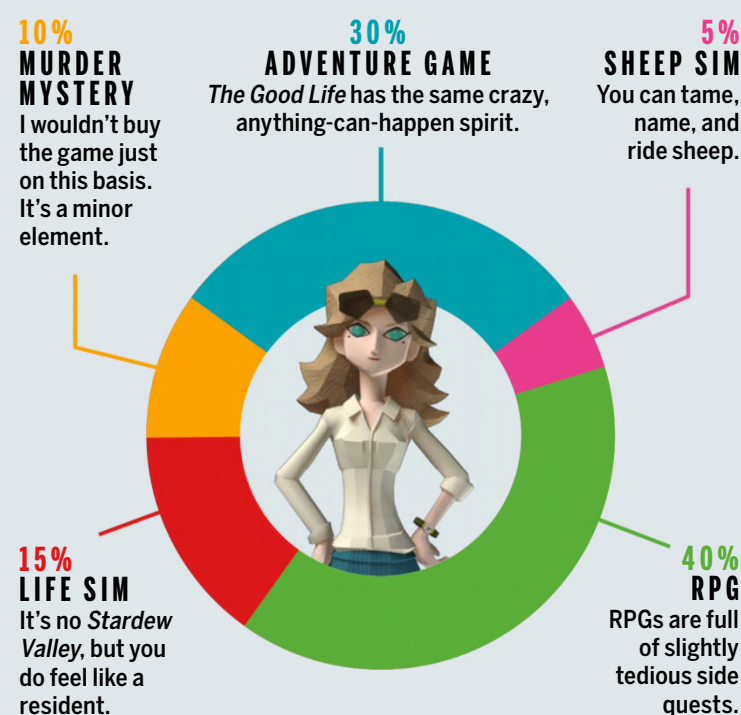
That's a shame, because it's the characters that make *The Good Life*, from the cash-obsessed Naomi to the half-cut local vicar, to Lonette, the buff farmer who lives just outside town. I like that their cat and dog forms retain elements of their appearance or personality, and I love the clay-like character models that express so much, even before you speak to them. Oftentimes, the game feels like a Wallace and Gromit pastiche of a modern sci-fi show.

As I reflect on *The Good Life*, it's with a warmth I didn't feel when I was traipsing back and forth across the wilderness to gather bafflingly elusive crafting components, for villagers that seemed to have confused me with Deliveroo. But the more you explore a place, the more you come to know it, and the more it starts to feel like a real place.

After solving countless tiny problems, tangling with bigger supernatural ones, and literally marking my territory with litres of dog piss, I've come to regard Rainy Woods as a home. ■

GOOD VIBRATIONS

The Good Life's genre stew



PC GAMER VERDICT

Weird, good natured and pretty funny with it, *The Good Life* stands apart, just like most SWERY games out there.

79



ABOVE: Every full moon, the residents turn into cats and dogs.

LEFT: Shrines offer yet more quests, and act as fast travel points.



The villagers follow simple daily routines.

DIE CARD

INSCRIPTION is a disconcerting, multi-layered card game

By Jody Macgregor

This is a card game with a villain. This shadowy figure, all staring eyes and long fingers, waits at the table for our game to start. I'm trapped in a cabin and have to play, under pain of death, though I can get up and stretch my legs. There are shelves of trinkets on the walls: a skull, a safe, a clock. They present puzzles to solve as part of the larger puzzle: how do I get out?

The game at the table is a deckbuilder, less *Slay the Spire* and more like the singleplayer mode of a CCG – a *Hearthstone* solo adventure with a wilderness Americana theme, all rattlesnakes and yeehaw. I collect a deck of animal friends, bullfrogs and wolf cubs with familiar stats and thematic abilities. The skunk smells so bad enemies have their power reduced, the beaver builds defensive dams, and so on.

The mechanics of this card game are wilfully off-kilter and grotesque. Most cards have a blood cost, which has to be paid by sacrificing other cards. (Which is why I've got a separate deck of squirrels – free cards worth one blood each.) Rather than being measured in hit points, damage against my opponent and I is counted

in teeth, which fall into a pair of scales. I need to get ahead by five teeth to tip the scales and win each round. There's an item on the table that promises to help me tip the scales. It's a pair of pliers.

My opponent isn't a simulation of another player and doesn't play by the same rules. He's more a Dungeon Master, or the Dealer from *Hand of Fate*, narrating encounters and putting on masks to portray NPCs as I cross a map. "Thar's gold in them cards!" he hollers as the

prospector, whose pickaxe transforms cards into rocks. Then he takes off the mask and sets up minis around a campfire to play out a scene with suspicious, starving travellers who offer to warm one of my beasts by their fire. He may be a murderous

The mechanics of this card game are wilfully off-kilter

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Part deckbuilder, part puzzle room, part nightmare

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Daniel Mullins Games

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
inscription-game.com

kidnapper, but he puts in so much effort I kind of respect him.

I spent hours in *The Elder Scrolls: Legends* playing singleplayer battles with fun twists: a siege dropped a stone wall across the middle of the table, a storm-tossed pirate ship slid cards back and forth. The twists in *Inscription* are just as novel. Every wolf card gains the ability to fly; a hook drags my cards across the board and turns them against me.

There's another twist, however. *Inscription* is the work of Daniel Mullins Games, who made *Pony Island* (in which the Devil forces you to play a buggy auto-runner), and *The Hex* (in which videogame characters re-live flashbacks to different genres they've been in). Like those games, *Inscription* changes as you play, revealing so many layers that if it was a cake, Paul Hollywood would shake someone's hand.

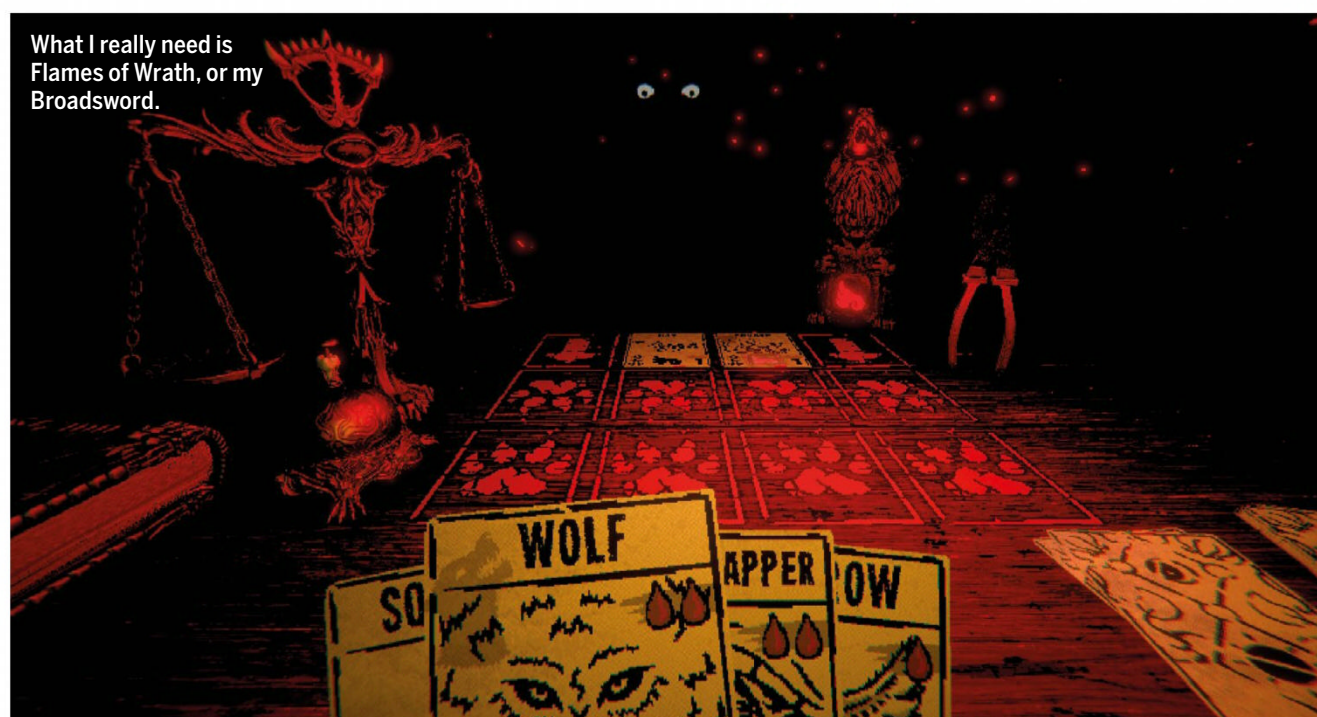
To discuss those layers, I'll need to spoil them even more than I have just by acknowledging they exist. Spoiler-averse? Skip to the verdict.

TRAP CARD

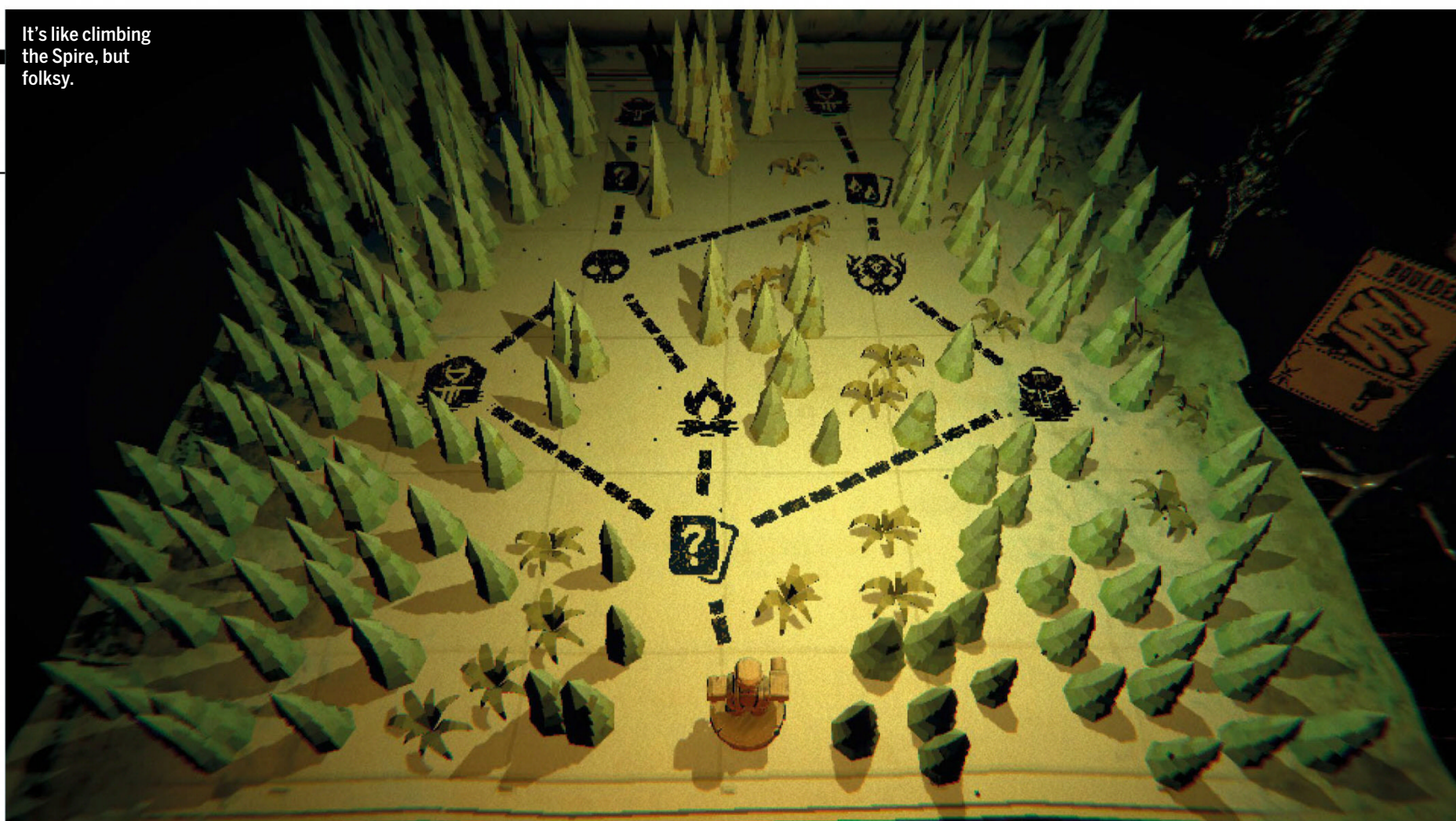
The second act of *Inscription* is a 2D pixel-art RPG in the style of the



ABOVE: Ask not for whom the clock cuckoos.



It's like climbing the Spire, but folksy.



ABOVE: Performing surgery on cards may harm their resale value.

FAR RIGHT: The stoat card talks back.



Game Boy *Pokémon Trading Card Game*. It trades horror for whimsy, and calling it 'a bit different' would be an understatement. What was a one-card-at-a-time deckbuilder becomes a CCG where I have to construct a viable deck of 20+ cards from a collection, then tweak it as I earn booster packs.

Though there's an automate option it doesn't create viably competitive decks, and I found manual deck construction a bit of a chore. Opponents with gimmick decks that require specific builds to defeat make it even worse. Get through this and there's a third and final act, which returns to something more like the format of the first act only with a sci-fi theme, but *Inscripture* lost me before that.

To be totally honest, I was getting a bit tired of the first act's structure before it was over with thanks to run-based repetition and multi-stage boss battles. But for those opening hours, *Inscripture* was delightfully creepy and full of new surprises. I just preferred being trapped in a spooky cabin to being trapped in a succession of less interesting videogames. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Inscripture plays well but unfortunately it just doesn't know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Shame.

69

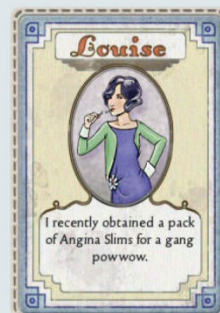


CARDS WITHOUT HUMANITY

More card games you can play alone



SENTINELS OF THE MULTIVERSE
Superhero brawls where every card is a comic book panel. Adapted from a tabletop game.



DAINGEROUS HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS IN TROUBLE
Lead your own girl gang in a 1920s boarding school.



HAND OF FATE
A Fighting Fantasy book with paragraphs of text replaced by cards, and combat right out of *Arkham Asylum*.



FAERIE SOLITAIRE
Fantasy solitaire with so many whimsical additions that it practically becomes a PopCap game.



ROAD WARRIORS

Fate can do one in **GET IN THE CAR, LOSER!**

JRPGs have a lot in common with road trips, even if you're usually travelling on the back of a chocobo or flying galleon. It's a journey with pals, bonding and bickering on back-roads. *Get in the Car, Loser!* has that – but it also has a sweet convertible. It's literally a road trip, where you hop from gas station to gas station on a straight stretch of road, while beating up demons.

The title is taken from the opening scene, where shy protagonist Sam is picked up by a friend and her boyfriend, before being dragged into an adventure to save the world. You see, Grace has stolen the Sword of Fate, and plans to use it to destroy the evil Machine God, whose followers are a bunch of creeps. Hot on your heels are agents of the Divine Order, who were waiting for the 'right' person to be chosen for the deed instead.

If it sounds like a clichéd JRPG story, rest assured that it's full of funny, rude, and quotable dialogue, and much more focused on its likeable characters than the overarching plot. It's written (and designed and programmed) by Christine Love, who you might remember from *Digital: A Love Story*

and *Ladykiller in a Bind*. It's refreshing to play a JRPG with a LGBTQ+ cast, and that deals with real-life issues – but that also offers the catharsis of destroying cultist scumbags in stylish combat.

Final Fantasy XIII meets Valkyrie Profile meets a recent Persona

DRIVE ANGRY

While the story is a big focus of the game, it gives equal attention to its battle system, which is esoteric enough to feel at home in a late '90s JRPG. *Final Fantasy XIII* meets *Valkyrie Profile* meets a

recent *Persona* game, which is to say it's fast-paced and semi-real-time, each of the four party members is assigned a controller button, and the menus are stylish as heck. There's a happy mix of furious button-mashing while you'll spend a lot of time in the menu improving your gear etc.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A JRPG road trip where battles break out on the open road

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Love Conquers All Games

PUBLISHER
Love Conquers All Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/CarLoser

There's no character levelling in *Get in the Car, Loser!*, and no traditional adventuring equipment. Your worth in battle is determined by the wearable trinkets you can buy when acquiring gas. These mementos are given backstories, and can be used to make more powerful versions.

Combat is energetic and innovative, supported by sumptuous pixel art and a banger of a battle theme. However, with little downtime in the game – there are no dungeons to explore, or towns to poke around in – it can feel like a relentless deluge of banter and battles. Not that the banter isn't sparkling, not that the battles don't get the blood pumping, but you can have too much of a good thing.

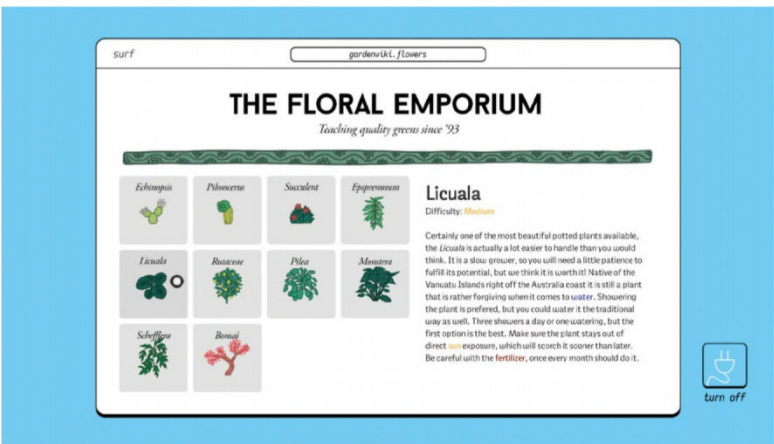
Perhaps best taken in small doses, *Get in the Car, Loser!* is still a hugely impressive game that channels the spirit of classic JRPGs into a thrillingly modern form. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Inventive, stylish and actually crackling with energy, *Get in the Car, Loser!* is an order you should follow.

82

BELOW: This is your grandma's pad. It's pretty swish.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Crystal Clod

LINK
crystalclod.itch.io

WATERING CAN'T

Definitely not murdering houseplants in **THE FLORIST**

The *Florist* is a game about being in a trendy apartment: a haven of tranquillity in a busy city. There's no TV to distract you, although you can play classical music, and bury your nose in a selection of stories from long-dead authors. If you want, you can try to keep your grandma's houseplants alive, a task she is certain even you will be able to manage on your own.

To that end, she sends you a parcel containing fertiliser and a jug – essential items as you point and click around the tiny apartment setting. Its main features are the tap (for filling the jug), the computer (for doing research), and the demanding, diva plants your gran insists on sharing a flat with.

Each has different needs, of course. Take the licuala, which fears the sun and only needs fertiliser once

a month, or the rutaceae, which wants to be watered, and additionally sprayed, four times a day. Luckily, you can open the laptop to view a handy guide, but the game doesn't keep track of which plants you've tended as you advance the clock. You only know when they begin to grow, or look a bit peaky.

As the days turn to weeks, your gran will post ever more fragile plants for you to look after. You'll also get letters, and occasionally books, in the morning mail. It's a game that would play best in quick daily bursts, which is why it's disappointing that *The Florist* doesn't include any way to save your game. But if you can play it all at once, or leave it running while you do other stuff, it's pretty satisfying trying to keep the things alive. (That's just a little tip for all the parents out there.) ■

70

LIFE'S A BEACH

ECHO BEACH imagines a future without music

Tim Sheinman makes beautiful detective games embedded in fictional music scenes. Think *Her Story*, as filtered through the NME. After *Family* and *Rivals* comes the darker *Echo Beach*, set in a future where music is banned, and where rogue musicians are hunted down by undercover agents.

You play as one of these agents, and your job is to infiltrate an online community, reading messages and listening to music for clues to their identities. Every time you work out a name, you feed the information back to your superiors, who will arrest the musician and give you new targets, the following day.

I love how Sheinman has reworked the themes of the previous games, which celebrated community and discovery in the world of music.

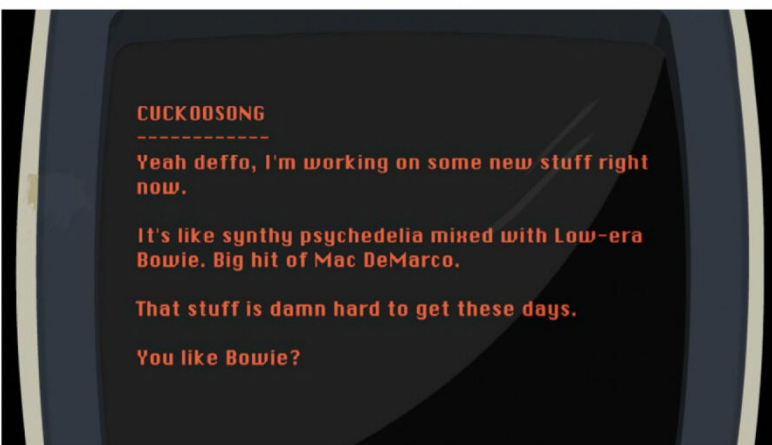
Here you're tearing a community apart, through the same detective work you learnt in *Family* – now complicated by feelings of guilt.

You might not be solving a murder, but there are few other games where you feel as much like a detective, poring over messages and replaying songs for clever lyrical and sound-based clues. It feels appropriate that *Echo Beach* offers, essentially, music puzzles. I just wish I'd been able to solve them.

Perhaps I'm tone-deaf, and unable to keep time, but I hit a brick wall when asked to locate a drum tempo, and chords, by listening to the playlist. I think that's 67 BPM, but the game doesn't seem to agree. These are not solutions you can brute-force, and that's to *Echo Beach's* credit, but it did feel like I'd been kicked out of the party halfway through. ■

77

BELOW: As in *Her Story*, the searchable database is limited.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Tim Sheinman

LINK
tim-sheinman.itch.io

Barry Burton: not so much a man as an upholstered anvil.



PHARMA POLICE

Enjoying the company of idiots in **RESIDENT EVIL**

However bad I am at writing, I rest easy knowing I'm better at my job than the S.T.A.R.S. bravo team. For me to approach their level of ineptitude this entire column would have to include my bank details, passwords, industry crushes and darkest secrets. The screenshots would be accidental selfies and the score would be a macaroni picture of a balloon.

It's the ideal way to set the stage for the alpha team, who, reassuringly, can't be any more useless than fuck-knuckled human hostess trolleys who wobbled into Spencer mansion before them. One can only assume that Delta team suffocated while donning their S.T.A.R.S. uniforms. By comparison, Chris and Jill look magnificently capable, even though Jill is a lockpicker without a lockpick and Chris can only carry six things. I'm carrying six things *right now*, and all I have to do is sit here and reach my word count. Also, anyone who doesn't immediately recognise Wesker as pure bastard evil shouldn't be trusted to be around cutlery, let alone firearms. They are all, without exception, idiots. But I love them and I love this game.

Then, we have the puzzles, which fill my heart with the purest joy

I love the fixed camera angles, which let me stand in corridors and make shapes while the moonlight hits Jill's haunted porcelain doll face. I love how every enemy feels like a frightening waste of bullets. I even love that the controls make absolutely no sense, even in their rejigged, modern incarnation. This is the *remake*, and it still feels laughably dated and cumbersome. But somehow, it just adds to the terror. If I had any control over my movements I could just avoid the zombies. Instead, *Resident Evil* is the survival horror equivalent of secretly driving an ice cream truck through Claire's Accessories.

S.T.A.R.S. IN THEIR EYES

Then, we have the puzzles, which fill my heart with the purest joy because

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A haunted house full of stupid, sexy supermodels

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3HHvYLF

they're so staggeringly, laughably, inexcusably impractical. Remember that people *work* in Spencer mansion. It's basically a functioning laboratory. Compare that to, say, a modern office, where the most minor inconveniences are enough to discourage us. Can you imagine being bothered to change a toner cartridge if you had to collect all seven secret moths first?

Resident Evil might be the easiest game to lampoon, then, but it's partly a defence mechanism on my part. Combining scary monsters with resource management anxiety is the smartest, most relatable way to scare the solids out of me, similar to if someone made a horror game about avoiding smalltalk with your racist old neighbours. We can sit here and smirk at *Res*'s idiosyncrasies, but I'll still be shitting it when my canteen runs out of oil and the Crimson Heads start re-rising. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Nobody should ever make another game that plays like this, and that's exactly why it's still wonderful.

85

BELOW: 'Portrait of a Young Games Journalist'.



ART ATTACK

LAYERS OF FEAR is spooky, but in a loud way

I've often wondered how I'd die in a horror movie. I assumed something heroic, like having my knees eaten while I lift starving orphans onto a rescue helicopter. *Layers of Fear* has been kind enough to confirm the grim truth. Apparently I get locked in a basement and starve to death after effing about with a ouija board I should obviously have left alone.

It's not even that I was stupid enough to play with such an obviously-cursed item – more that I broke the sacrosanct gaming rule of following the light and going where the game wanted me to. It's not the ideal finale for my first go, but it does highlight one of the game's most interesting and unforgiving features: if things go wrong, that's it. Game over.

A second attempt is more fruitful, quite literally. I stumble into a

kitchen that features a painting which spews forth endless apples, and I'm not sure if it's supposed to be terrifying or delicious. This is perhaps the biggest issue with *Layers of Fear*: one scare isn't enough. There have to be 20, daisy-chained together like monstrous bunting. The game has a tendency to bury you in cascading dolls and warping corridors. It all comes quite early for me, too. Before I really have time to understand what 'normal' looks like, the doors are switching around and the paintings are flying off the walls.

It's effective, but some restraint would help the big scares stand out. I still love the ambient storytelling, artistic suffering, and the scrawled notes hinting at past horrors, but I also feel that Bloober Team don't quite trust me enough to decide when I need to be scared. ■

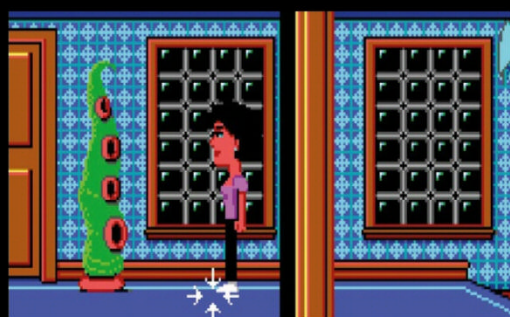
71

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

PUBLISHER
Aspyr



MANIAC MANSION

Reviewing something as influential as *Maniac Mansion* feels slightly absurd, like I'm giving you a critical appraisal of bees. But it's worth knowing that *Maniac Mansion* is still worth playing. And it does loads of stuff that still feels surprising. As a point-and-click game I'm expecting to meander around without any sense of urgency, but I immediately saunter into the wrong room and get locked in a dungeon. Better still, I'm able to escape when one of my buddies gets captured and we find a button hidden behind a fake brick. The interface feels cumbersome now, but there is something immersive about having so many ways to bollocks up a puzzle. ■

80



RUSTY LAKE HOTEL

It's quite hard to find games about big old buildings that a) aren't scary and b) I haven't re-reviewed before. That's why *Rusty Lake Hotel* is nestling here like roasted venison upon a bed of mushrooms and rosemary. Which, with the necessary context, is still a rather frightening thought. It's Fawlty Towers meets Hannibal: a game about preparing dinner for (and with) your guests. The route to murdering and cooking them is often crooked – it involves solving a series of puzzles while they wait for death – but the weirdness of it all helps excuse some ludicrous solutions. Unless Tabasco sauce does in fact come from the nose of deer skulls, in which case I stand corrected. ■

66



Even the furnaces in *Pacify* look terrified.

PACIFY

Topping off this month's theme is *Pacify*, a game that proves that investigating spooky places with friends does nothing to lessen the unpleasantness. Although, to be honest, the most frightening thing about *Pacify* for me was the nausea I got from playing for too long – vengeful wraiths have nothing on a stomach that feels like it's been in a tumble drier. Sickness aside, this is a simple, moreish investigative horror game and possibly the first that'll make you glad to lay eyes on horrible dolls. ■

65



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAME DESERVE



98

GROUP TEST

Stay frosty with our pick of the best air coolers on the market.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Let us help you build the killer gaming rig of your dreams.

GROUP TEST

CPU AIR COOLERS

Keep your chip cool and quiet with one of PC Gamer's recommended air coolers.

By Chris Szewczyk

These days all-in-one liquid coolers seem to get all the attention. I get it, they look awesome and really add some personality to your rig. But let's say you don't have the budget for a liquid cooling solution but still need to cool your CPU. Here's where the best CPU air coolers come in. Even the most expensive air cooler is nowhere near the cost of an

AIO liquid cooler, and they offer simplicity and reliability.

Following the bigger is better mantra is a good start towards finding your ideal air cooler, but you need to make sure it fits in your case. Noctua's NH-D15 is a mighty beast, to say the least. There's also some leeway on style here. While maybe not as flashy as some liquid coolers, some air coolers do come with RGB lighting to add some pizzazz to your rig.



2



AS500 Plus

DEEPCOOL £45

A fantastic all-round cooler

1 The Deepcool AS500 received worthy attention when it was released, but the AS500 Plus with its additional fan elevates it to the point where it can compete with any single tower cooler on the market. At the same time, it undercuts competitors in price. Even if you spent double the money on a premium single tower cooler, your cooling performance won't be a lot better.

Its cooling ability belies its compact dimensions. Only more expensive dual tower coolers beat it, but not by a lot. Its dual fan design no doubt helps, though it's

also quiet. Cooling and low noise levels are welcome, then add to that great build quality and subtle ARGB good looks and there's nothing to complain about. It even comes with its own ARGB controller, and there's a white version too if you like. The Deepcool AS500 Plus punches above its weight. Short of stressing it with an overclocked high-end processor, the AS500 Plus ticks all the boxes.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great value
- Low noise levels
- Efficient cooling

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL 1200, 1150, 1151, 1155, 2011, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 2X140 MM PWM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 500-1200 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 140 MM X 102 MM X 164 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 31.5 DB(A)

Pure Rock 2

BE QUIET! £35

An affordable and effective cooler that's very quiet

2 If the brand name didn't already give it away, the Be Quiet Pure Rock 2 really is quiet! It's a single tower cooler equipped with the company's highly regarded Pure Wings 2 PWM fan which carries a low 26.8 dB(A) noise rating. That means it's very quiet indeed. It feels really solid too, an indicator of good build quality, even at its low price. We wouldn't describe the Pure Rock 2 as the most beautiful cooler on the market. But if you do have a windowed case, you could consider the smarter black version for a more polished look instead. The Pure

Rock 2 is primarily designed to cool, unseen and unheard.

Though perhaps its 150W TDP is a touch optimistic, and at least an Intel Core i5 11600K or AMD Ryzen 7 5800X won't present a problem for the Pure Rock 2. For anything other than high-end CPUs the Pure Rock 2 will keep your chip cool and quiet. If you're not interested in bling and want something that's a step up from bundled coolers, this is great.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Very quiet operation
- Great price
- Good build quality

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA1150, 1151, 1155, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM3 & AM4 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X PURE WINGS 2 120MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** UP TO 1500 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 87 MM X 121 MM X 155 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 26.8 DB(A)

GROUP TEST



EXCELLENT FANS
THAT ARE A WELCOME
BLACK COLOUR

3

NH-D15 Chromax Black

NOCTUA £90

Air cooling at its best

3 The Noctua NH-D15 Chromax Black is considered by many to be the best air cooler on the market. We really love it too. It performs brilliantly, it's got excellent fans that are a welcome black colour, and its build quality is fantastic. Really only 360mm AIO coolers outperform it. If you want an air cooler that can handle any consumer CPU on the market, you might find one to match the Noctua flagship, but you won't find any that truly beat it. Under normal operation the NH-D15 can be considered silent, but when pushed hard it

becomes louder than you might expect. Though we don't mind having some optional cooling headroom when needed.

Its expense, and sheer size, are the only things that count against it in my eyes. Notably, though, Noctua has a tradition of support for new sockets, and LGA 1700 support will either be included in the box or available to you as a free kit, depending on when that NH-D15 was made.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent fans
- Optional cooling headroom
- Can handle any consumer CPU

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1
COMPATIBLE / FANS: 2X NF-A15 HS-PWM / FAN SPEEDS: 300-1500 RPM / DIMENSIONS (L X W X H): 161 MM X 150 MM X 165 MM / NOISE LEVEL: MAX 24.6 DB(A)

NH-P1

NOCTUA £100

Quiet computing enthusiasts, look here

4 Noctua's NH-P1 passive cooler is very much a niche product, and one that fans of quiet computing have been looking forward to for some time. It's expensive, bulky, and generally limited to CPUs in the 65W range. Sounds like a dud? Hell no. Its appeal may be limited, but if you're a user who values silence above anything else, then the NH-P1 will be exactly what you're looking for. The NH-P1 is a great match for something like an AMD 5700G. That way you could omit a discrete GPU and play esports titles in silence. The NH-P1 will keep this class of CPU

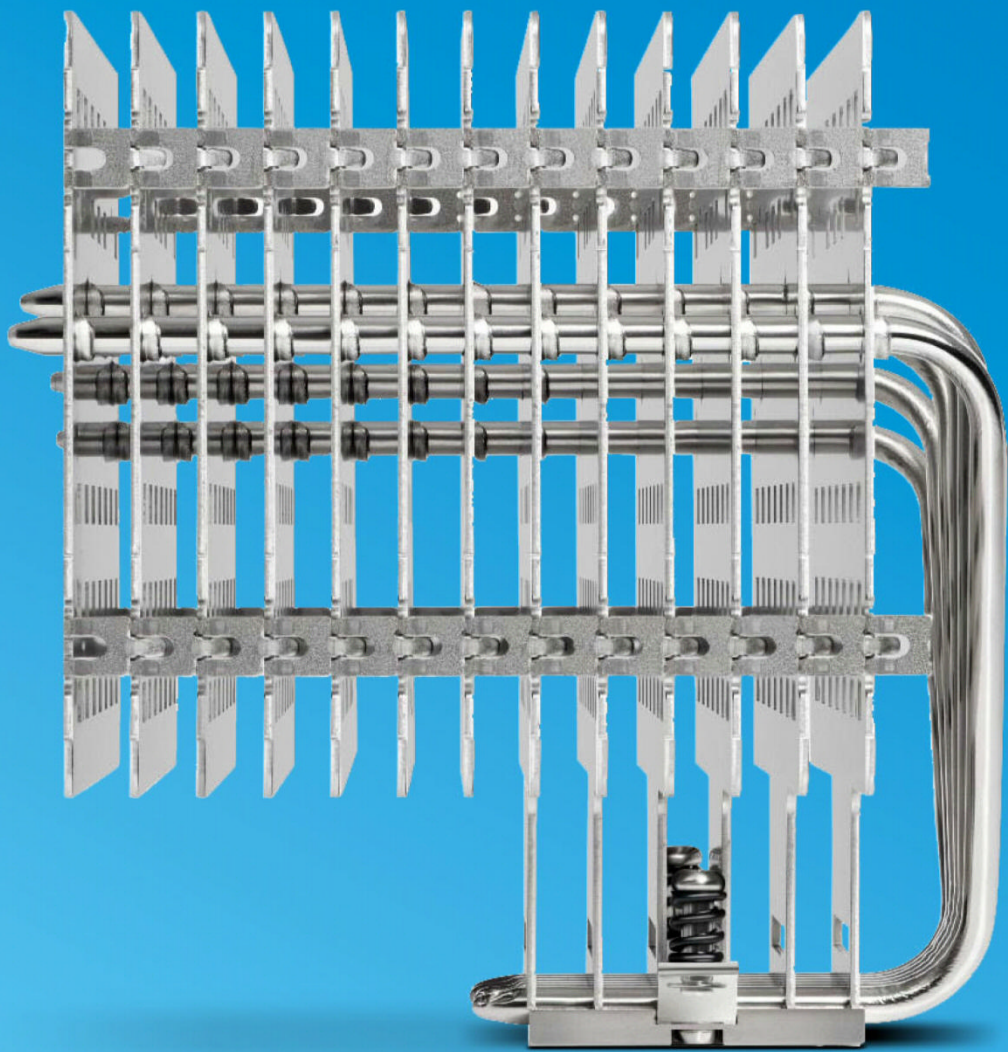
boosting to its max, but only if you have at least some airflow. The chances are you have a rear case fan that's not far away from it anyway. If you want, you can still opt to attach a fan, too.

The NH-P1 is built for a specific purpose. If you sleep near your PC or run a lounge room media centre, the NH-P1 will go a long way to ensuring that your PC is truly silent. Clearly it's not meant for everyone though.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Silent!
- Every aspect of it is premium
- You can add fans if you want

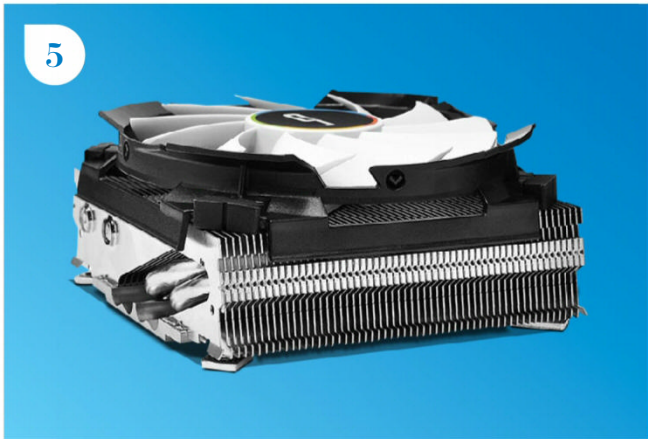
SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1
COMPATIBLE / FANS: N/A / FAN SPEEDS: N/A / DIMENSIONS (L X W X H): 152 MM X 154 MM X 158 MM / NOISE LEVEL: 0 DB(A)



WHAT CPU SOCKETS DO AIR COOLERS WORK WITH?

Not all coolers support all CPU sockets. Cooling for AMD Threadripper CPUs can be tricky, for example, as the sheer size of these chips mean you'll want proper coverage for optimum cooling. Similarly, Intel 12th Gen LGA 1700 compatibility is now a topic of discussion, so pay close attention to the list of supported sockets if you're investing in one of those. Stock from earlier in 2021 will definitely lack support, but you may be able to find a compatibility kit.

When it comes to AMD Ryzen desktop CPU support, things get a little easier. Aside from the aforementioned Threadripper chips, all other Ryzen CPUs use the same AM4 socket. That means that any CPU cooler that lists AM4 support is good right the way up to the current Ryzen 5000-series CPUs.



C7

CRYORIG £30

A great choice for a truly tiny system

5 The Cryorig C7 has been on the market for some time, but it's been updated to support newer sockets. It's perfect for a truly compact small form factor system thanks to its 47mm height and adherence to 'keep-out' zones, where it will not interfere in any way with other system components.

The C7 destroys the stock Intel cooler. It's rated for up to 100W but is better suited to 65W class CPUs. This leaves it a bit of headroom for Turbo bursts. If you're overclocking, or using a high core-count processor, you can give it a pass, but that's to be expected. With the right CPU it will stay surprisingly quiet for its compact size. Its top flow design will help to cool the VRM and M.2 SSD, too, something that can be neglected in compact systems.

The Cryorig C7 is a niche cooler, but for the tiniest builds, the C7 does an admirable job. If you want a little bit of extra TDP headroom, there are copper and graphene coated versions, too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Truly tiny size
- Cools well considering its size
- Quiet low load operation

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL 1200, 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2 & FM1 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X 92MM QUAD AIR INLET / **FAN SPEEDS:** 600-2500 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 97 MM X 97 MM X 47 MM / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 30 DB(A)

Dark Rock TF 2

BE QUIET! £80

Cooling for your whole system

6 Keeping your CPU cool is vital, but so is overall system cooling. A cooler like the Be Quiet Dark Rock TF 2 blows air downwards, which helps to keep hot running M.2 drives, and your vital motherboard VRM, running cool. This is something that can often be overlooked in AIO cooled systems that lack good airflow over the motherboard, particularly if you have a GPU heating up everything around it. The Dark Rock TF2 performs much like other single tower air coolers, and though it's on the pricey side, it's not unreasonable so given the inclusion of two high-quality fans. Its ability to mount a fan above or below the heatsink (or both) adds a lot of installation flexibility. You can use it in all kinds of systems from powerful gaming PCs through to compact SFF systems.

In the Be Quiet tradition, the Dark Rock TF 2 is very quiet, particularly under low loads and with a rating of up to 230W, it can handle all modern CPUs, though overclocking will be beyond it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Downward blowing for more cooling
- Quiet operation
- Good build quality

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, AMD AM3 & AM4 COMPATIBLE / **FANS:** 1X SILENT WINGS 3135MM, 1X SILENT WINGS 135 MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** UP TO 1400 RPM / **DIMENSIONS (L X W X H):** 163 MM X 140 MM X 134 M / **NOISE LEVEL:** MAX 27.1 DB(A)

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

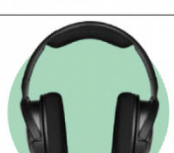
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Spire is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,182

MOTHERBOARD		MPG X570 Gaming Pro Carbon WiFi MSI £230 The MSI Gaming Pro Carbon isn't the most lavish X570 going but it's pretty darn close without the ludicrous price tag.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 5900X AMD £549 AMD's latest Zen 3 architecture cruises through the newest games and hands you plenty of cores for CPU-intensive workloads.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,600 Corsair £170 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £151 Western Digital is delivering PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850, making the most of that AMD Ryzen platform.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I’ve done all of my racing so far using Microsoft’s Xcloud streaming on PC”

Getting lost in the Xcloud in **FORZA HORIZON 5**

Like millions of other Game Pass members eager for something pretty to play, I’ve been sinking my teeth into *Forza Horizon 5*. It’s only my second *Forza* game since I played *Horizon 4* earlier this year, and I’ve already had a blast on the new map. It’s bright, cosy, and extremely fast.

While *Horizon 5* overall feels extremely familiar to the last game, I figured this would be a great opportunity to shake things up a bit: Instead of downloading all 100GB of *Horizon 5* to my poor, chronically packed SSD, I decided to look to the cloud. That’s right, I’ve done all of my Mexico racing so far using Microsoft’s Xcloud streaming on PC, and I’m a little amazed at how well it works. Just click the Cloud Gaming button on the Windows 10 Xbox app

MORGAN PARK



THIS MONTH
Drove some very fast cars among the clouds.

ALSO PLAYED
Hunt: Showdown

(you’ll need Game Pass Ultimate, by the by), pick a game from the huge library, and wham-bam-presto: *Forza Horizon 5* comes alive.

But not the PC version of *Horizon*, it seems. It looks like all Xcloud games are actually streaming you the Xbox Series X version of whatever game you’re playing. It’s a little weird to see the Xbox version’s limited video options on the main menu, but I guess it makes sense for how simple the process of cloud gaming is supposed to be. Plus, running a virtual Xbox means that you’ve also

ABOVE: When the light’s just right, *Forza 5*’s gorgeous landscapes come through well.

got access to tons of backwards compatible Xbox 360 and original Xbox games as well.

CLOUD CHASING

Anyways: back to *Forza*. It plays way better than I’d hoped over the cloud. The delay is undeniably there, but after switching to the Performance preset in *Horizon* and clocking up the framerate to 60fps, I honestly stopped noticing the lag. I’ve even been able to beat my friend Ian in a few races, who loves driving games so much he plays on a racing wheel with pedals and a shifter. There’s something funny about winning

THE EXCEPTIONAL FRAMERATE SMOOTHS OUT THE STREAM’S ROUGH EDGES



All this beautiful desert is taking up none of my hard drive, but a lot of bandwidth.

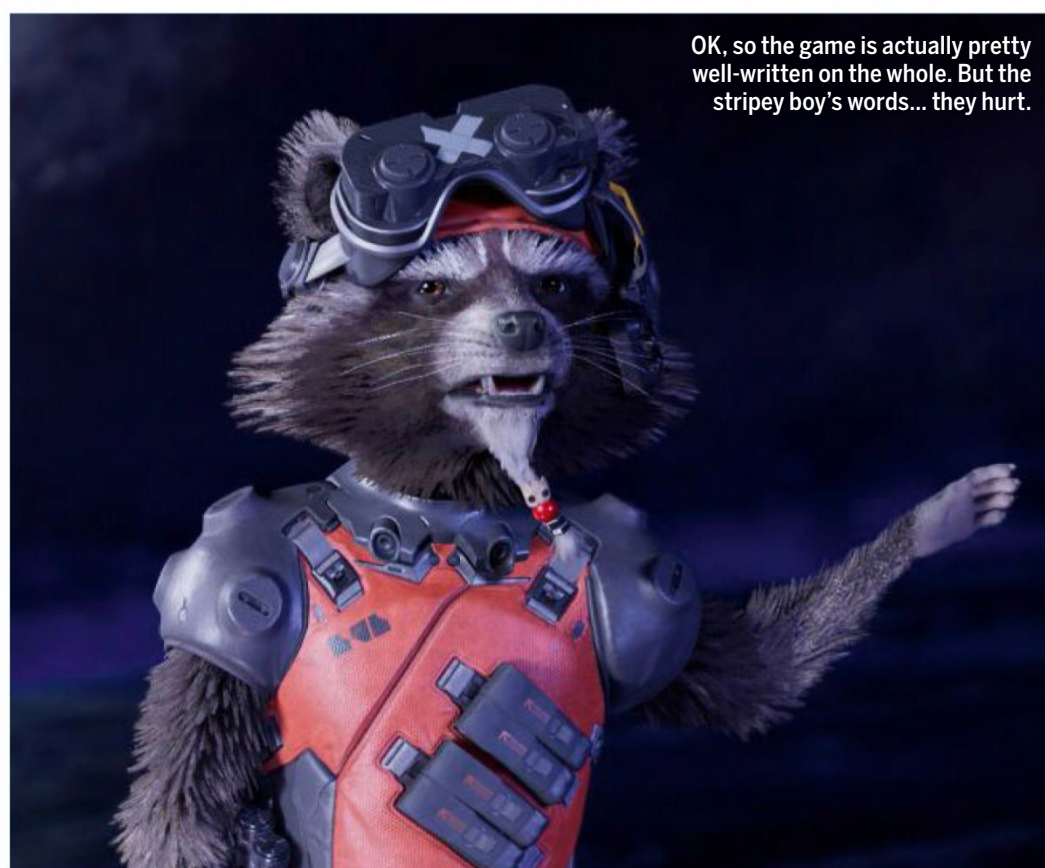
against his top-of-the-line rig and specialised hardware while I'm basically playing a YouTube video.

But video is definitely one area where Ian will always have me beat. *Forza Horizon 5* can look beautiful over Xcloud, but the comparison between my streamed image and his proper download is night and day. Colours are washed out by the time the image beams through space back to me and it's not abnormal to see fuzzy pixels and artifacting.

Xcloud's artifacting is most noticeable on objects and edges in darker areas. Mexico's jungles started to look a bit muddy for me with overcast skies, so I've been naturally sticking to the brighter desert roads.

That said, I'd still say *Forza* on the cloud looks 'good'. The cars are gorgeous and the exceptional framerate smooths out the stream's rough edges. I've snapped a few screenshots of the game and, at least if I squint my eyes and don't blow it up too large, I can barely tell it's captured from a video stream.

Visual nitpicks be damned, *Forza* on Xcloud has gone beyond my needs by not making me sacrifice another slice of my hard drive to play a new game. And if I ever want the full experience, the option is there. ■



OK, so the game is actually pretty well-written on the whole. But the stripey boy's words... they hurt.

“Some grumpy aliens call me a jackass”

Dead ends in **MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Got my jetboots upgraded to max, at least.

ALSO PLAYED
The Ascent,
Genesis Noir

Time is tight – we've only got one 'rotation' (however long that is) to explore this graveyard of derelict spaceships. Rocket points out the best way forward, and warns against a dead end path. Of course, ignoring all dramatic tension and logic, I go down the dead end first, seeking collectibles. But then, a surprise – Rocket actually calls me out, directly reacting to my time-wasting with a bitter wisecrack. Ha ha, ho ho, see how my gaming habits have been delightfully skewered.

Guardians of the Galaxy has been widely praised for this reactivity, with loads of dialogue triggered by the player's actions – but my experience has been that it's almost all been along these lines. I go off to explore, and some grumpy aliens call me a jackass for doing so.

Maybe I'm the grumpiest alien of all, but this kind of gag does bother me. The reason I wander off exploring every nook and cranny instead of role-playing my character is because thousands of games have trained me to. Including this one. There *are* collectibles at the end of those dead ends – upgrades, costumes, and even entire, easily missable story sequences – and, because of the game's linear nature, if you don't find them right away, you can never go back for them.

DEAD WRONG

So what do you want me to do, game? If I go with the flow then I miss out, but if I poke around then I get jeered at, often even interrupting more interesting dialogue. Believe me, developers, I don't *want* to ruin the pacing of every story-driven game for myself – it's not particularly fun, constantly trying to figure out what the wrong way to go is all the time. This is what you've trained me to do.

Instead of having your cake and eating it too, why not actually get rid of this now tired trope? Ditch the dead ends, stop making fun stuff only obtainable by un-fun behaviour, and I'll cheerfully follow the path you want me to follow. With a bit less grief from a talking rodent, please. ■

“Legends of Runeterra feels like it’s in the midst of its own golden age”

LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA is still the best digital card game ever made

With the new Arcane animated TV series out on Netflix and big events launched all across Riot’s different games, November might as well have been called Lolvember. But aside from sinking a few hours into *League of Legends: Wild Rift*, the one Riot game I’ve been obsessed with lately is *Legends of Runeterra*, its unparalleled card battler that’s secretly the best game in the whole *League of Legends* universe

It’s not just that *Legends of Runeterra* is filled with innovative ideas and fun new mechanics, but that it slots into my life in a way no other free-to-play game really has. Unlike *Hearthstone* or *Magic: The Gathering*, *Legends of Runeterra* is generous enough with its currency that even casual players can eventually collect every card available. That also means that even when I take long breaks, I don’t feel left behind by the release of new expansions. Just start slinging cards and, soon enough, I’m able to afford whatever flashy new deck I’m ogling.

Legends of Runeterra is also such a lovely game because it’s always

▶ **STEVEN MESSNER**



THIS MONTH
Got wrapped up in the *League of Legends* universe.

ALSO PLAYED
League of Legends, *Final Fantasy XIV*

changing. Entire new sets drop every few months, but I also appreciate how much Riot has invested in fleshing out the singleplayer aspects too. Last year, its Lab of Legends mode introduced a roguelike deckbuilding component to the game, opening up an entire avenue of play that doesn’t require squaring off against other players. And, recently, that mode was transformed into Path of Champions, which expands the roguelike elements while also introducing a lot more storytelling in the form of little cutscenes that sometimes play between battles.

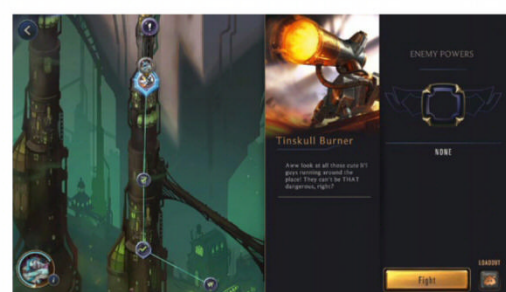
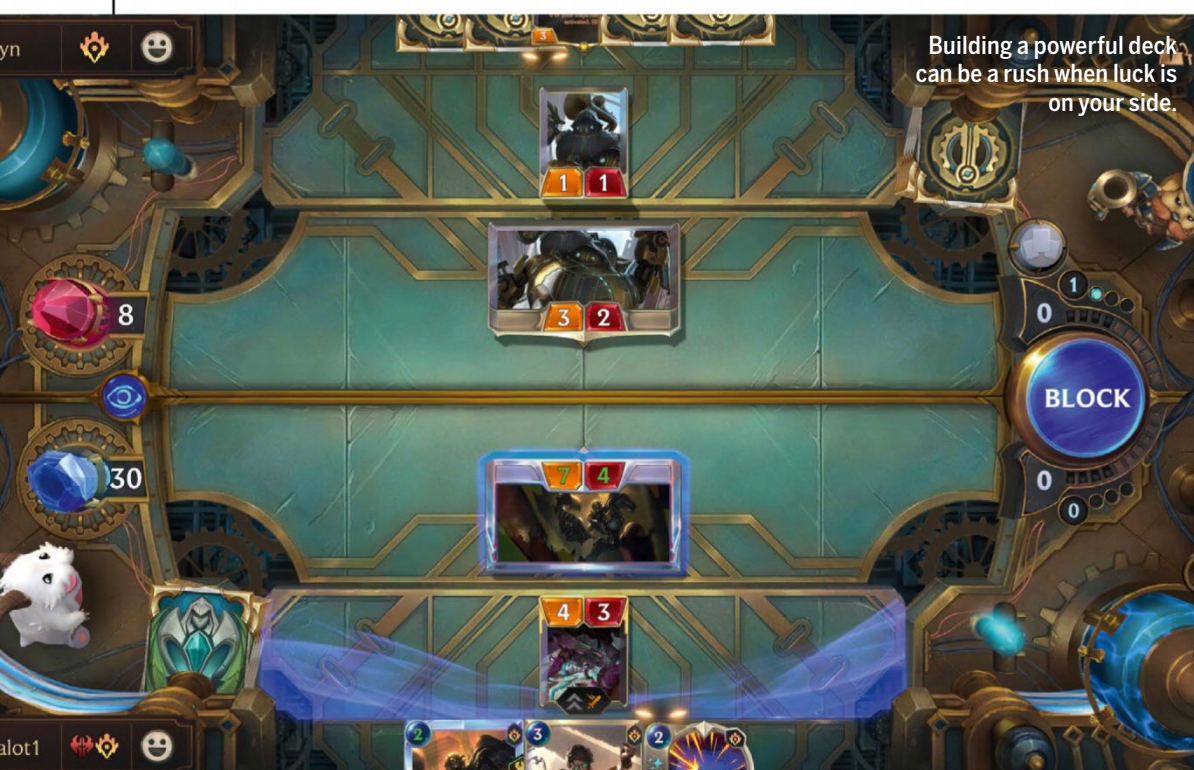
I APPRECIATE HOW MUCH RIOT HAS INVESTED IN FLESHING OUT THE SINGLEPLAYER

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

Unlike Lab of Legends, which was a static gauntlet of boss fights, Path of Champions gives you a map with a web of encounters you can choose between – similar to *Slay the Spire*. It also adds a whack of new progression systems, like being able to level up specific champs to unlock permanent bonuses for future runs.

I’m not sure if Path of Champions is my favourite iteration on this roguelike deckbuilding idea that Riot has been experimenting with for the past year, but it is exciting to see how much *Runeterra* is willing to reinvent itself every few months. And it still retains that distinct joy of slowly assembling a deck filled with wild synergies that, if you’re lucky, turn you into an unstoppable force.

Coupled with how generously it doles out new cards to you and how diverse the competitive meta is at the current moment, *Legends of Runeterra* feels like it’s quietly in the midst of its own golden age. In fact, I much prefer this more relaxed pacing and the ways it’s become such an articulate exploration of *League of Legend’s* iconic champions – but in card form. ■



LEFT: Each node on the path has new events, battles, or shops.

BELOW: Some Path of Champion’s missions have fun narrative moments.



Who knew a game about moving house could be relaxing?



“One of the finest examples in recent memory of showing instead of telling”

UNPACKING is hiding one of this year's best stories

Why am I struggling to keep my eyes dry over a missing mug? After several levels of *Unpacking*, I had become accustomed to seeing this tiny, pixelated little item hop from house to house. First, it was a reliable holder of coffee and then of toothbrushes, when a chip became visible. But in one move, it vanishes. Thanks to this puzzler's subtle storytelling, I care more about this little cup's disappearance than I do about most of the characters I've played this year.

Unpacking is an apt title on multiple levels. While the game is primarily focused on you rummaging through cardboard boxes and finding homes for the various items, trinkets, and accoutrement the main character has, it also describes the way you piece together the story as you play through, each finished level becoming a photo in an album.

While the calming, *Tetris*-esque loop of making order out of chaos appears to be the main attraction, it

BEN TYRER



THIS MONTH
Put away virtual clothes instead of real ones.

ALSO PLAYED
Forza Horizon 5, *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy*

becomes clear that the game's real aim is to let us see a life unfurl in front of our eyes, the main character's story told through the items she takes with her, how they change, and how they fit (or don't) into the environments she lives in.

The game's first major storytelling accomplishment is that those items give us a sense of who she is without any dialogue. For instance, we see how a pig plushie has a gouge in one level and is patched up the next. An easy-to-miss moment, but one that

shows the endearing qualities of the character I'm playing as. The places are just as important as the items in this regard. While the first childhood bedroom you unpack brims with possibility in the opening level, it's borderline unrecognisable when you return halfway through.

SHOW TIME

The experience is one of the finest examples in recent memory of showing instead of telling. With no dialogue, it allows you to lose yourself within the story, giving you enough time to create connections with the items you store away and experience the central character's life through your own eyes, rather than being spoon fed what is happening.

Maybe that's why that mug has me blubbing. Watching it travel between rooms and shared houses over the years reminded me of the items that I've carted across the country. To see it vanish is the game's reminder that moving through life's different phases means the things we love get left behind. But that doesn't mean the memories disappear. ■

THE MAIN CHARACTER'S STORY TOLD THROUGH THE ITEMS SHE TAKES WITH HER



APEX LEGENDS

Storm the beaches with a backstabbing blender. *By Nat Clayton*

Last season notwithstanding, *Apex Legends* has had one hell of a year. So, to celebrate, Respawn has sent our gang of delightful murderbuds off on an unseasonably sunny holiday to close out the year. Welcome to Storm Point, *Apex Legends*' largest map to date.

With a landmass roughly 15% larger than World's Edge, Storm Point is truly massive. But it's also both denser and taller than any *Apex* arena yet, laid out as a sprawling jungle wrapped around a mountain that extends higher than any previous map, dusty peaks descending into thick foliage before levelling out into white sandy beaches.

It's gorgeous, but it's also a jarring shift from the tight, clustered maps we've seen so far. Without obvious hotspots like Kings Canyon's Skulktown (RIP), or World's Edge's Fragment, matches are scattered, and it can take some time before you find a scrap. It's the closest *Apex* has ever come to feeling like a more traditional battle royale like *PUBG* or *Fortnite*, trading constant firefights for the lingering tension of stalking through the wilds for five, ten, even fifteen minutes before firing a shot.

I'm not entirely sure it's a trade-off that works. *Apex* is traditionally a game that wants you to fight early and often, and already you can see players choosing to land in

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Respawn Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

LINK
bit.ly/3Cp4bvG

more central locations like Barometer or Cascade Falls to force an early combat. Clustering in one spot just makes the rest of the map feel even emptier. It's a shame, because Storm Point has some of the strongest locations of any map – densely layered, tactical arenas with a strong focus on verticality.

To help you get around the island quicker, Storm Point features the nippy wee Trident hovercars from Olympus. But it also trades the traditional redeploy balloons for *Halo*-style gravity cannons which punt you in a single direction at ludicrous speeds. You'll need them, too, lest you risk being bogged down fighting the island's ecosystem, with Prowler dens and spider nests ready to ensnare passing squads. These beasties can be shockingly vicious, but reward hunters with extra loot, evo shield charges, and crafting materials for clearing them out.

ASH, CATCH 'EM!

Who better to guide you through the jungle than an expert tracker, then? Season 11 brings back *Titanfall 2* baddie Ash as a new Legend, and as a deadly hunter-killer, she's already proving herself a favourite among

Twitch streamers and Wraith mains. Ash's abilities are powerful enough in their own right – her tactical is a snare that prevents enemies from leaving a small radius, while her ultimate tears a rift in space-time, leaving a one-way portal to bring her and her team straight into the fight.

But her real trick lies with her passive, which flags death boxes on the map as soon as any player on the map beefs it. This lets her know where the fights are happening, pulling her squad into the action with terrifying efficiency. By throwing a data-knife into a death box, she can even ping the poor sod's killers. In a game defined by third-partying fights, Ash is brutal, and has already

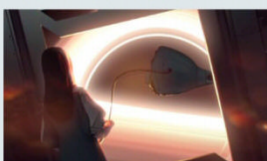
I'M NOT ENTIRELY SURE IT'S A TRADE OFF THAT WORKS

established herself as a top-tier pick.

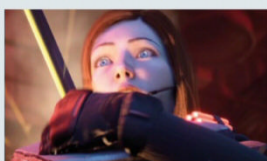
Following a good Ash around the map can be a terrifying thrill, as you track down and pick off weakened squads with ruthless precision. But it's so, so easy for a bad Ash to lead you to your doom, and her lone-wolf kit often makes playing with one feel like you're playing constant catch-up.

Really, my favourite thing about Ash is the absolute venom she brings out in my main space mum, Horizon. There's a sour history between these two, one that's been spun out through cinematic trailers and now plays out through *Apex*'s phenomenal voice interactions. Believe me when I say I'll never tire of hearing Dr Somers revive this cold, calculating murderbot while spitting out lines like "back on yer hooves, ya heartless toaster". ■

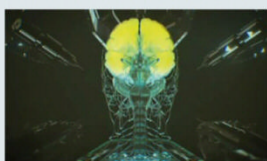
ASHES TO ASH Our newest Simulacrum has this whole 'death and resurrection' thing down to a tee



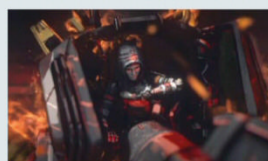
1 Dr Ashleigh Reid, scientist and dear friend, punts Dr Mary 'Horizon' Somers into a black hole. This will have consequences in 87 years' time.



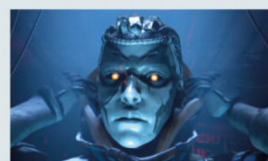
2 Reid then dies, stabbed in the back while attempting to murder the rest of Somers' colleagues to steal their unobtainium crystals.



3 Reid's mind is salvaged and turned into a Simulacrum, a cyborg built from the fleshy brain of a human being, and shortens her name to 'Ash'.



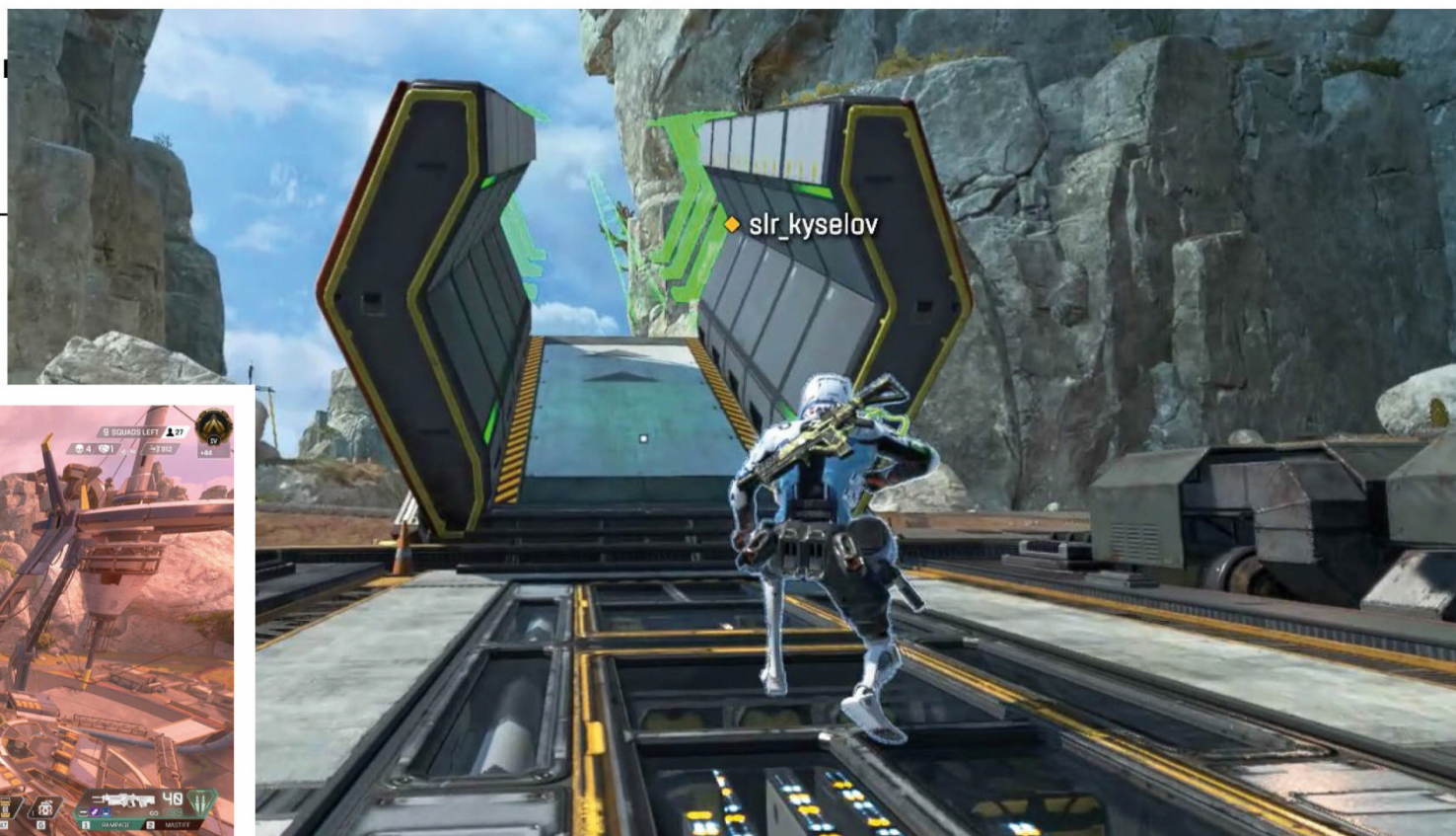
4 Ash then dies, crushed into a pulp by *Titanfall 2*'s best metal boy BT-7274, as kind of a footnote during that game's stellar singleplayer campaign.



5 The shattered pieces of Ash's skull are retrieved in *Apex Legends*' Season 5 quest. A few months later, she gets a cushy job running the game's Arenas mode.



6 Horizon, having not quite gotten over the whole black hole situation, accidentally wakes up Ash's latent memories and triggers her entry into the game.



ABOVE: Storm Point's gravity cannons will give you a good kick up the rear end.

ABOVE LEFT: On a map this large, Valkyrie's jetpack is essential.

BELOW: The new CAR SMG can take two types of ammo, making it a powerful early pick.

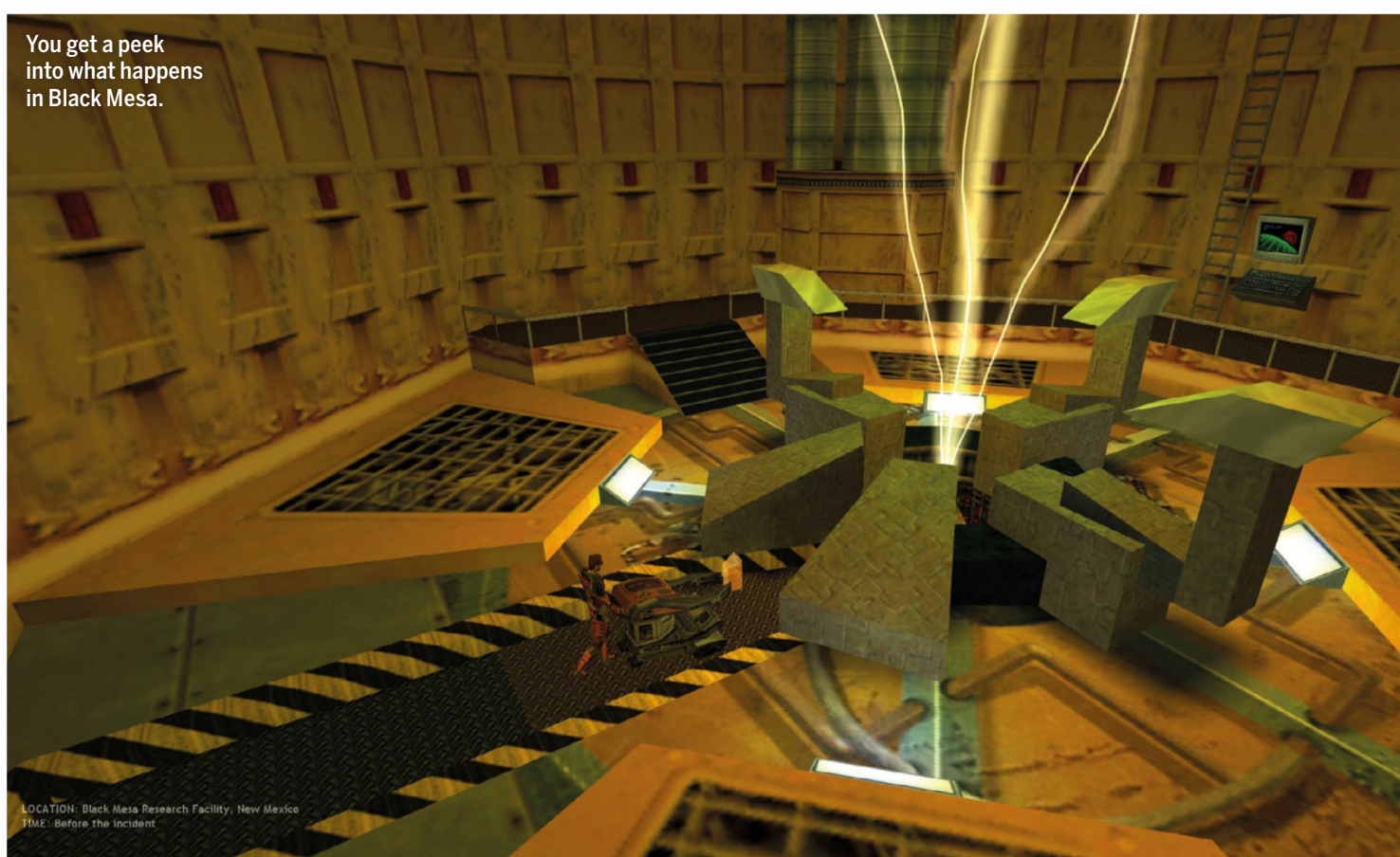


Otis is the new Barney.



TOP: The Xen invasion doesn't just happen at Black Mesa.

You get a peek into what happens in Black Mesa.



LOCATION: Black Mesa Research Facility, New Mexico
TIME: Before the Incident



HALF-LIFE: DELTA

Exploring unforeseen consequences. *By Chris Livingstone*

Gordon Freeman and Nick Farell have a lot in common. Both work in the field of secret government science: Freeman is a theoretical physicist at Black Mesa, and Farell is a generator technician at Delta Base. Both of their companies are working on teleportation technology in huge, sprawling underground labs in New Mexico. Both are men of few words (no words, to be precise) and despite their nerdy leanings are just as capable with rocket launchers and shotguns as they are with scientific equipment. And both are about to have an extremely bad day.

Half-Life: Delta is a full conversion mod for the original *Half-Life*, and it takes place at the exact same time. Farrell has come to Delta Base to do his job as a generator technician, while over in Black Mesa Freeman is also arriving for his morning duties of riding a tram for a half-hour and then pushing a cart full of alien science into an anti-mass spectrometer. We all know how that goes. In fact, in *Half-Life: Delta*, we actually get to see the scene of Freeman pushing the Xen crystal on his little cart, and then skeedaddling when everything suddenly goes boom.

The resonance cascade, in which monsters from Xen pour into our world through dimensional rifts, isn't localised in Black Mesa. Over in Delta Base, familiar *Half-Life* creatures like headcrabs and vortigaunts begin popping in. And Farell, like Freeman, doesn't have anything resembling a weapon. As Delta Base begins getting torn to shreds, all you can do is watch. At first...

COMMON GROUND

Thankfully, Delta Base has its own version of Barney Calhoun. I quickly

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 19, 1998

DEVELOPER
Valve

PUBLISHER
Sierra Studios

LINK
half-life.com/en/half-life

meet Otis, a security guard, who speaks Russian. In fact, everyone in Delta Base speaks Russian (at the moment, anyway, there are plans for English voices to be added). Luckily, there are subtitles, and there's not all that much information that needs to be explained out loud. Monsters are trying to kill us, so let's kill them



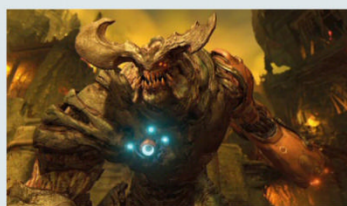
MONSTERS ARE TRYING TO KILL US, SO LET'S KILL THEM INSTEAD

instead. I follow Otis, who is kind enough to shoot a bunch of zombies, until I find a crowbar. Don't worry, it's a completely different crowbar than the one Gordon Freeman is currently picking up for the first time over in Black Mesa. Farrell's crowbar is yellow, not orange.

With a melee weapon in hand, I do something terrible if not completely unexpected. I promptly beat Otis to death. I know! I know. It sounds like an awful thing to do, but there are a lot of monsters around and I really need a gun of my own. Killing Barney's for their ammo is a common occurrence in *Half-Life* (I bet Freeman is doing it right now) but as Otis drops dead, my screen goes black. Otis, unlike the many Barney's of *Half-Life*, is a mission critical character. I find out why when I reload and he unlocks a few doors for me using the retinal

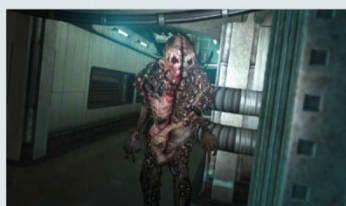
MAD SCIENCE

Games where science screwed everything up



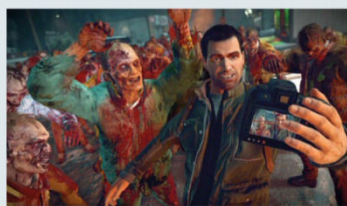
DOOM

Sure, let's try to harvest power from Hell. What could go wrong? Besides absolutely everything?



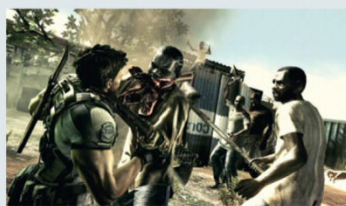
SOMA

Scientists created an AI to oversee the last of humanity, but it started animating corpses.



DEAD RISING

Scientists created mutant wasps which turned people into zombies. Yes, really.



RESIDENT EVIL

Umbrella Corporation went from creating cosmetics to developing bio weapons. Then, zombies.

» scanners. Thanks, Otis. Sorry about the attempted murder!

Delta Base isn't all that different than Black Mesa, really. It's a massive network of corridors, offices, labs, and facilities, with a great many air ducts that can be slithered through when need be. It's filled with scientists and office workers and guards, though many are dead at this point, lying in puddles of blood, crumpled in stairwells, or crushed by heavy security doors they weren't quite fast enough to escape through. Many of your co-workers die right in front of you in traditional *Half-Life* fashion, slapped to death by zombies as you watch through plate glass, or plunging to an explosive death after stepping onto a malfunction elevator.

The ones who survive are helpful. Several open locked doors for me, and I'll occasionally come across a technician who has concealed himself in a safe space and can inject me with a dose of healing meds. But mostly, everyone is dead and it's up to me to escape the facility.

RUN AND GUN

I'm not usually a fan of shooters that don't give you a ton of spare ammo. Rationing bullets in a first-person shooter usually seems like a waste. I've got guns, let me shoot 'em! But it works well in *Half-Life: Delta*. Rather than rushing through the base pouring ammo into everything that moves, I take my time, slowly creeping through the darkened corridors and blood-splattered offices. New guns are parcelled out pretty rarely. Get used to that pistol, it'll be a while before a shotgun appears, and even longer before a machine gun does.

Moving slowly doesn't just save ammo, it helps me figure out the layout of the base and how I can get from area to area. At first I feel like I'm getting lost and backtracking a lot, but I eventually get a feel for things. The path forward is not quite as signposted as Valve's *Half-Life*, but more often than not I have a good idea of where I'll need to go to escape the current peril and find the upcoming peril. And it's a bit of a throwback, but there are colour-coded keys needed to unlock doors from time to time, *Doom*-style. It's been a long while since games in general gave up on those, but I enjoyed hunting them down in Delta Base. Maybe more games should bring them back these days.

As I make my way through zombie-filled labs, more familiar *Half-Life* monsters begin showing up. Those annoying sonic dogs (houndeyes), those squid-faced things (bullsquids), those tentacle monsters (just called tentacles, apparently) and of course plenty of environmental hazards like malfunctioning electrical equipment and explosive barrels I never seem to notice until I'm discharging a shotgun a wee bit too close to them.

Eventually, I run into Otis again, who proves even more useful, opening up an armoury, collecting explosive charges, and using them to blast open a sealed door. And then he escorts me to a tram. Unlike Freeman, who used his tram to get to work, I'll be using mine to get the hell out of here. And I've got a bunch of guns, so I can even shoot at monsters on my tram ride. Otis, sadly, won't be coming with. He waves goodbye and the last I see of him he's shooting the hell out of a pack of zombies in a security room.

The tram, naturally, doesn't deliver me to safety, but it does give me some brief hope as I leave the underground complex and actually see the cloudy sky above. It's always such a relief to make it to the surface in a *Half-Life* game or mod, even if hope for escape is short lived. Before much longer I'm killing a tentacle

with toxic waste so I can once again descend underground to reach another subterranean complex.

SUBSURFACE TENSION

Half-Life: Delta follows a lot of the same structure as *Half-Life*. As you might have guessed, at some point the overworked military arrives and heavily armed soldiers attempt to keep a lid on the resonance cascade by slaughtering everything that moves, human and otherwise. Luckily, I love fighting the military in *Half-Life*. Finally, ammo is plentiful, weapons abound, and I'm not counting my grenades, I'm just chucking them. And I'll say this for the army: they can't teleport in behind you like those sneaky Xen



THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF CUSTOM MODELS IN THE MOD

creatures do. Plus, you get to see a bunch of army guys get killed by monsters just like your co-workers were. At the end of the day, Farrell is capable enough to become a one-man army and defeat the actual army. And yes, Farrell does make his own trip to Xen, just like Freeman.

But even if the story beats are the same, *Half-Life: Delta* doesn't really feel like *Half-Life*. Black Mesa and Delta Base may mostly be constructed from the same parts and pieces, but they do wind up feeling like very different places. There are hundreds of custom models in the mod, lots of new textures, and many custom sound effects. The soundtrack and look of Delta Base feel refreshingly different and provide a new atmosphere that really doesn't feel like you're retreading through *Half-Life* again, even if so much of it is familiar. In every respect, *Half-Life: Delta* is a full conversion of *Half-Life*.

It's also huge. There are over 30 maps in the mod, and they're big ones. If you're looking for a shooter that complements the original *Half-Life*, and even takes place side-by-side on the timeline, you should definitely check out *Half-Life: Delta*. If you do, say hi to Otis for me. And remember: don't kill him. You need him more than you know. ■



BARNEY CALHOUN

He was in *Half-Life 1 & 2*, *Blue Shift*, and *Half-Life 2: Episode 1*. He wasn't seen or even mentioned in *Episode 2*.

M.I.A.
We're still waiting to learn what happened to these beloved Half-Life characters



ADRIAN SHEPARD

G-Man stuffed him in an interdimensional closet at the end of *Half-Life: Opposing Force*. He deserves to be let out.



RUSSELL

The guy was indispensable in *Half-Life: Alyx*, which takes place before *Half-Life 2* – in which he's never seen or mentioned.



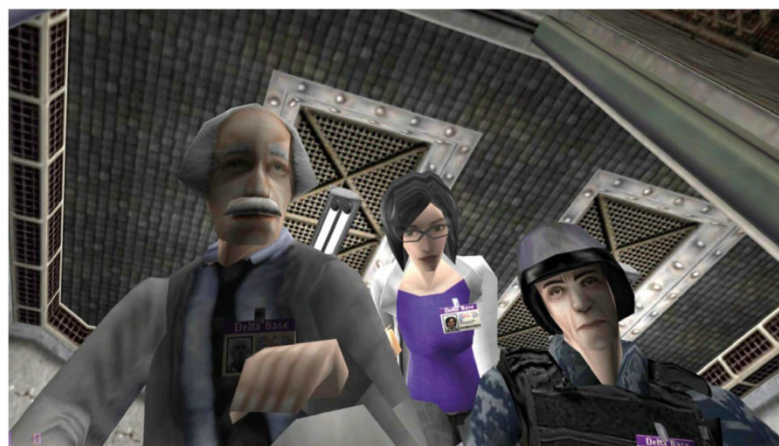
ODESSA CUBBAGE

Cabbage was in *Half-Life 2* and is mentioned in *Episodes*. But after teaching you to use an RPG, he's gone.



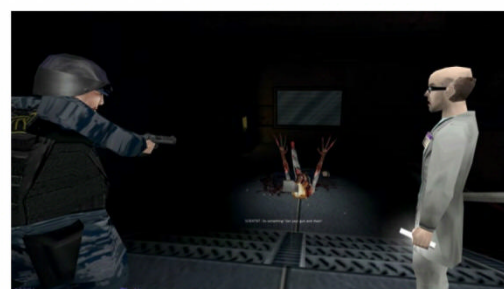
GORDON FREEMAN

We get a glimpse of him in *Half-Life: Alyx*, but he's been in limbo since 2007. Will we ever swing his crowbar again?



ABOVE: Teleportation must be easy. Every monster can do it!

LEFT: Yes, fellow technician, please jab me with that syringe.





BUILD A DECK IN BACK 4 BLOOD

Play your cards right to beat back the ravenous horde. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

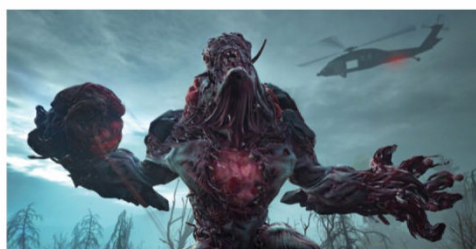
TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Tips guide:
bit.ly/3kaNldA

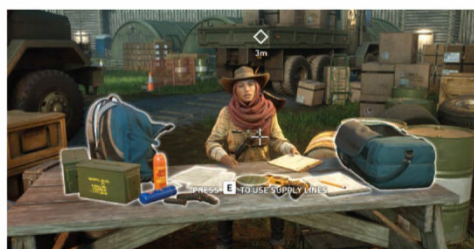
Top builds:
bit.ly/3kaOR11

Character list:
bit.ly/3CPTjg1



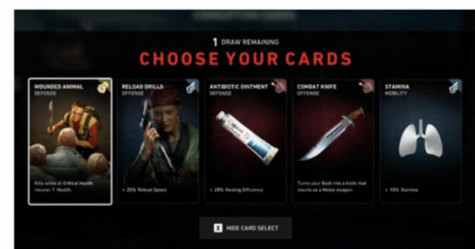
WORST NIGHTMARE

1 *Back 4 Blood* is not an easy game, especially not on the two higher difficulty levels. To compete with the many zombies (sorry, 'Ridden') and special enemy types in your way, you're going to need a balanced deck and team. So let us show you how.



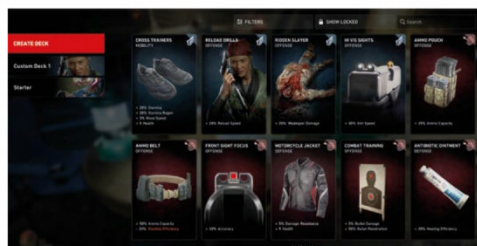
SHORT SUPPLY

2 When you start you'll be given several basic cards. You can get more, and expand your choice of buffs and improvements, by progressing Supply Lines in the Fort Hope hub. For that you'll need Supply Points, which you get by completing campaign missions.



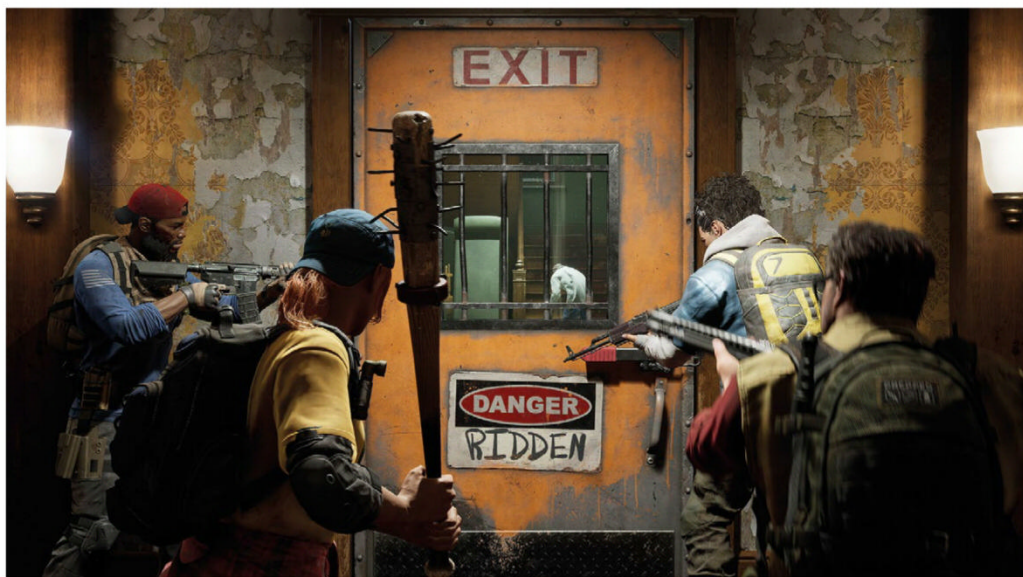
TOP OF THE PILE

3 Drawn cards persist for an entire run in *Back 4 Blood*, and the first card in your deck activates automatically. That means you should make this your most powerful card so you can make the most of its top-tier bonuses, and stick your weakest cards at the bottom.



SPICE OF LIFE

4 You can have 15 cards max in your deck, so there are a colossal number of combinations. Create various custom collections in Fort Hope and name them around their intended specialisation, such as melee or healer, to make your life easier in future.



TEAM SPIRIT

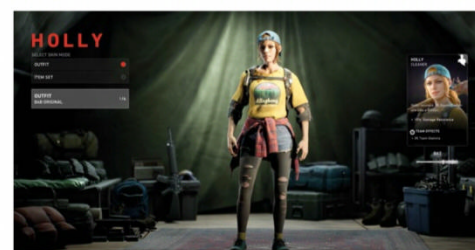
5 As with any multiplayer game, *Back 4 Blood* is easier, and much more fun, with friends. Bots and randoms can be unreliable, so plan over Discord, and pick characters whose unique perks complement each other and your playstyles.

CORRUPTION CARDS



SURPRISE MECHANICS

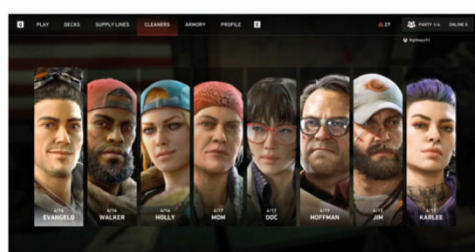
6 The optimised card collection of a co-ordinated squad will be handy at the end of a chapter when the game sticks you with a Corruption card, making things harder. But you get to choose a new card too – choose very wisely.



BETTER TOGETHER

7 Think strategically about how cards can interact with each other. For instance, combining a melee damage buff with Holly's damage resistance makes for a good close-quarters combination. Then add Battle Lust, which restores health with each melee kill.

SEEN AND NOT HORDE *Watch for these traps that alert nearby Ridden*



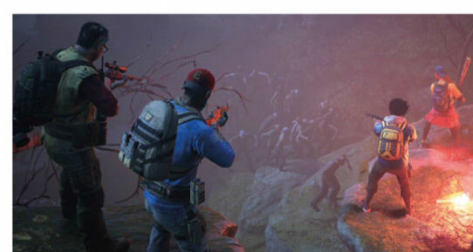
SPRING CLEANING

8 The most powerful bonuses you'll enjoy are character specific, so take the time to get to know each available Cleaner and build decks around your favourites. Note: Some characters are locked until you finish the first chapter of act 1 in co-op.



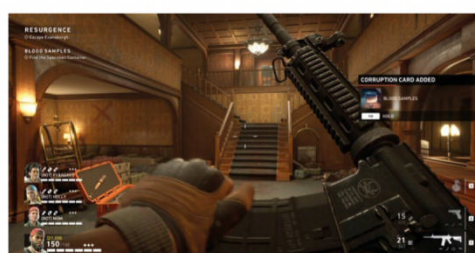
GIVE AND TAKE

9 Pay close attention to card descriptions as you add them to your deck and apply them. While some may have very appealing bonuses, they may also inflict debuffs and modifiers that complicate things. If it harms your role in the team, put it in the bin.



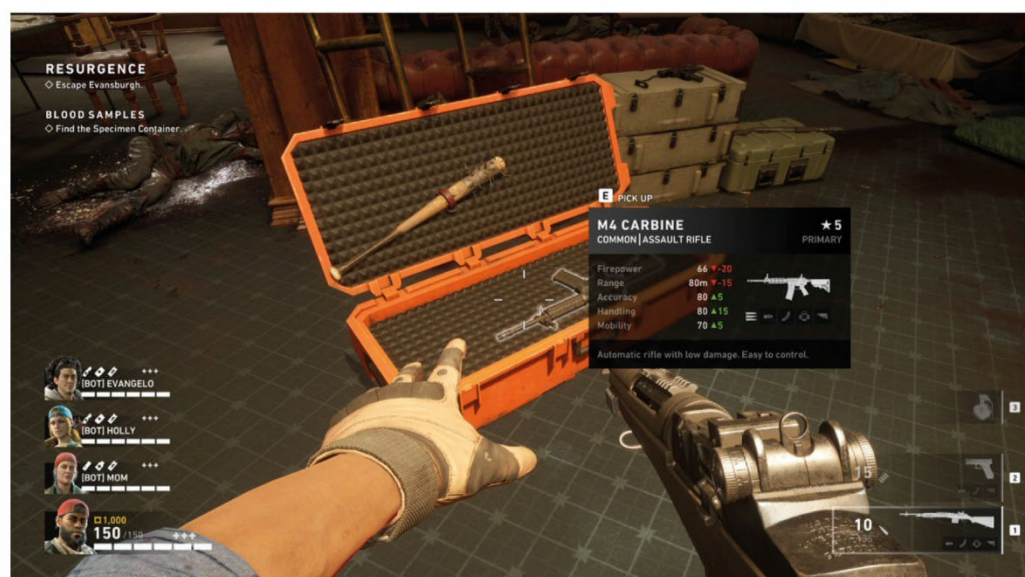
FREE TRIAL

10 If your run ends, the cards you chose during that session reset. While frustrating, it still gives you the chance to experiment with all sorts of deck combinations. Don't agonise over every last card: get in the game and see what works.



LOCK AND LOAD

11 While it pays to specialise, one thing always worth buffing is reload speed (unless you're running a melee build). The advantages are obvious: you're at your most vulnerable when you're not firing, so any card that minimises that is worth including.



PACKING HEAT

12 Equally you should always pay special attention to cards that bestow an inventory boost. In most cases you'll only be able to carry one type of each bit of gear, so adding extra inventory slots can be invaluable.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

KILLING EVERYONE IN HITMAN

Stealth be damned.

By Matt Killeen

I'm a *Hitman* purist. The ideal playthrough involves a few people getting food poisoning and passing out, before there's a terrible accident where someone nasty dies in an ironic way.

Less a murder-simulator, than a death-by-misadventure-simulator. I think it's why the two movie adaptations leave me cold. If I was directing, it'd be all choking on vol-au-vents and you wouldn't see Agent 47 at all. But when my daughter plays, she embraces the film aesthetic. She goes in shooting... become death, destroyer of worlds.

While the body count is impressive, it's not what you'd call efficient. There's a real ammo issue, and often the target flees once the big guns come out. However, while I usually restart after the automatic weapons kick-in, I wondered if it was possible to hit all the targets and then, wipe everyone out. *Hitman* is a passable shooter and with pacifist playthroughs all the rage, I'm pulling a 180. Everyone is going to die. All people.

I also wondered about the notion of innocence in the game. If you're a soldier of a corrupt regime, you're fair game really, especially if you get in the way. Maybe security guards are too, on that basis. But if you're a guest at the party of someone who can at best be described as evil? By your friends may you be known, I suppose. What if you're just setting up the sound-system? This complexity makes precise rules woolly or unfair, and I'm leaning on the latter.

Rule One tends to preclude going in all guns blazing. Rule Two is where it promises to get complicated. I'm also cheating slightly and doing the first season of *Hitman*, as this has the locations I know best. I'm going to abuse the automatic weapons I've earned and never used in a normal playthrough. Rule Three is about looking like an angel... an angel of death.

Paris's The Showstopper is the *Hitman* level I know best of all, having played it endlessly, waiting for the next episode to unlock. It's a beautiful, immersive simulation, that is a honeycomb of stacked puzzles. The armed intervention, which I'm calling The IAGO Farrago, threatens to fracture this delicate balance, and as such it's a proof of concept.

There are plenty of horrible people upstairs at IAGO's auction of state secrets, while Dalia Margolis and Viktor Novikov's actions cost innocent lives. Screw them, they're all going down with the goons. Then there are the employees, but they should probably know better, and finally, there are the guests. I'm making the call that they're all awful people, which they seem to be if you listen in on their conversations for any time at all.

"J'FAIS DES TROUS..."

Full-frontal assaults in all those crowded, open halls proves suicidal so I'm driven to experiment, with healthy doses of sneaking and drainpipes as usual, but leaving a

FULL-FRONTAL ASSAULTS IN ALL THOSE CROWDED, OPEN HALLS PROVES SUICIDAL

trail of dead, which is new to me. I find myself trying to hide bodies out of habit and being rumbled, when the best bet is just headshot everyone who might see the body. Whittling down the armed guards by constant flanking through different rooms, picking up new weapons as you go, is the strategy that works best. Every time they send someone to fill body bags, I just make more work for them. Eventually it's just me and my quarry.

So, I turn to the auction guests. I work through them, pleased by the dropped IAGO invites that tell me I've nailed another monster.

It was here that things take a turn that I wasn't expecting. It's one thing being Leon the Professional and cutting a swathe through goons and monsters like a slow-moving ghost, leaving the fallen behind you like an arrow for the foolish to follow. It turns out, it's quite another gunning down a stream of pleading, crying waiters and models. I begin to find it difficult, even upsetting. I try hardening my heart. "You're all terrible people, neck deep in corruption and exploitation, with horrible dress sense," I cry. But a little voice inside me wails back, "Should not these wayward souls be given a shot at redemption? Are they not people too? If you prick them, do they not bleed?"

Well, yes, but that blood is just lines of code, just as they are. They aren't real. This is a video game. But my buzz has been totally harshed. Thanks a lot conscience.

It takes another hour to complete the wholesale and complete slaughter of every single NPC, and find Victor in the safe room where I started. I wanted it to feel like a triumph, and it was definitely a thing, but I just feel drained.

This means that by the time I reached the sunlit Amalfi Coast for The Mansion Fumigation I'm already conflicted. I declare everyone in the mansion and lab as the enemy, deciding to deal with the rest of the town later. I spurn the tempting thought of doing the whole thing as the Plague Doctor and start

THE RULES

1. All targets must be eliminated and tasks completed.

2. All police, military, security, employees, and contractors must die, plus guests. Everyone, basically.

3. All in the Requiem Suit... because style matters.

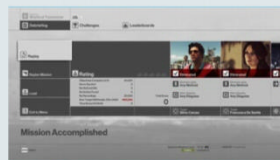


Suit and Chrome
by ICA. RS-15,
model's own.

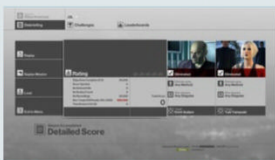


BODYCOUNTDOWN

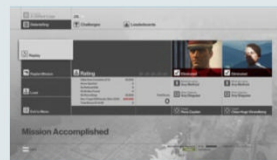
Who's Top of the Popped Off?



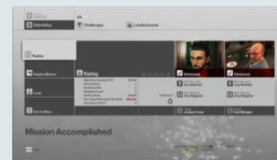
Down at **#5**, it's Sapienza with 'Just the Mansion'



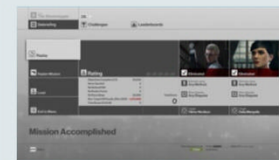
Hakkaïdo are in at **#4** with 'Everyone in a Small Map'



Holding at **#3** is 'No Civilians' By Marrakesh



New at **#2**, it's Bangkok with 'Don't Be Our Guest'



At **#1**, it's Paris with 'Every Living Soul Extinguished'

» with the lab. I've a bioweapon and its creators to destroy, otherwise I can't go home.

I complete the original mission in under ten minutes. I've nailed the combat now, and just walk round and round the mansion killing as I go, silently, like the Grim Reaper in a white suit. It's exhilarating, but amongst all the macho nonsense and comments about my clothes that the guards bellow in inappropriate accents, I hear, "Ours is not to reason why!" Do the goons need to work themselves up? Are they assuming death and having second thoughts? Surely, some reluctance must be creeping in now there's a pile of bodies in the hall so tall that they have to walk round it? I am overthinking this.

QUALITY OF MERCY

And again, it's the unarmed employees that make me feel queasy. So much so, that as I emerge into the sunlight and walk towards the gates to continue the reign of terror, I pause at the brink. Behind me is a charnel house. Blood is trickling past me towards the town square, where people are resting, drinking coffee, and sunning themselves. It's beautiful. Believable. And I can't do it. There's no rationale I can apply to the process that makes sense in-game. The massacre thus far is a message for bad people. The spree killing of a whole town would obscure it. Meanwhile, back in the real-world, I don't want to do it.

I drop the rifle, holster my ICA chrome and step into the square. There I find Rocco's sister, the mansion employee, still calling up to wake her shiftless brother. He can't be bothered to go to his job in the kitchens – and I'm supposed to steal his chef's whites – but she wants him to

make something of his life. She's missed everything. I let her go, the one and only survivor of the vengeance that Ether had brought upon her place of work.

On the one hand, A Guided Cage (or in this form The Legation Negation) seems to offer some clearer moral choices. The corrupt army, the scheming general, and white-collar master-thief Strandberg are all malevolent, and the Swedes are harbouring a criminal on a technicality. So, I clear out the consulate and the old school, but the population have seen me kill a lot of soldiers by now, and they're anxious to let everyone know about it. As I move through the market that becomes irritating and, flippantly, I turn an assault rifle on the crowd. What follows is truly distressing. It's a well-rendered window onto hell. Too real. I quit out, load up an autosave, carry out the plan and leave.

I wonder at myself, playing a game and simply refusing to do what I'd said I would do, again. I tell myself the next level will be different.

Club 27 in Bangkok offers me some respite. Yes, the murdering rockstar, his bottom-feeding lawyer, and their friends are fair game, but how to approach a hotel full of other guests and staff? Not being as familiar with the destination as the other levels, I walk around to reacquaint myself. As I do I listen to the guests talk... and realise they are all terrible, terrible people. They are dismissive or patronising about the country, affecting boredom with it, and rude about the staff. They are bored, rich and entitled idiots. So, all the guests die. Round and round I circle the hotel and its corridors and gardens, wiping out the security. The staff get to go home. The

Guest Eradication. I am fine with all that, apparently.

JAPANESE HOSPITALITY

By the time I reach the Japanese hospital of dubious morals for the super-rich, I am tired and grumpy. And armed. I don't care who the targets are, but it's something about involuntary organ donation. I have zero sympathy for the medical staff, guards, or guests, merely wincing a bit with the cleaners and sushi chefs. I call it The Sod Everyone, or Min'na mechakucha. Am I just desensitised by playing an interactive version of Alan Clarke's Elephant non-stop for days on end? Or is that process making me more discerning somehow? It's easy to see Bangkok's waiters as real people, just getting by, whereas the hospital



I'm not ruining their tranquility.



A good night's work.

THEY ARE BORED, RICH, AND ENTITLED IDIOTS. SO, ALL THE GUESTS DIE

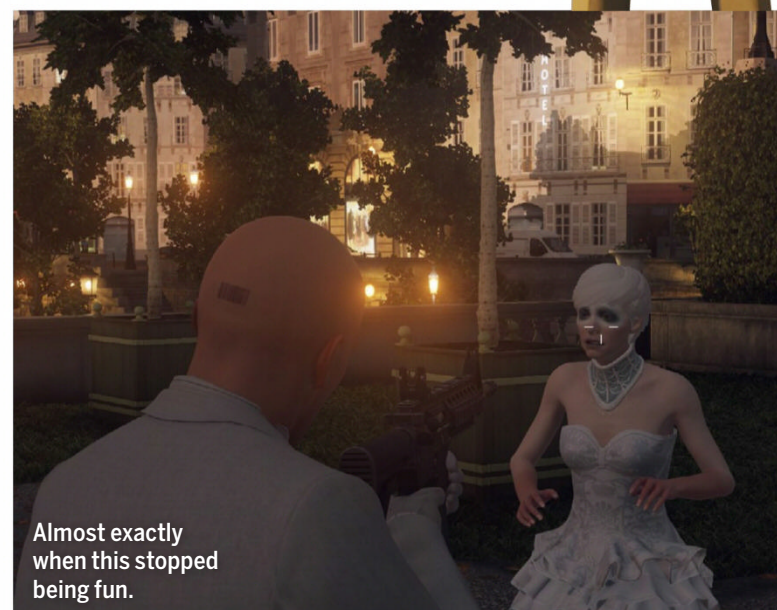
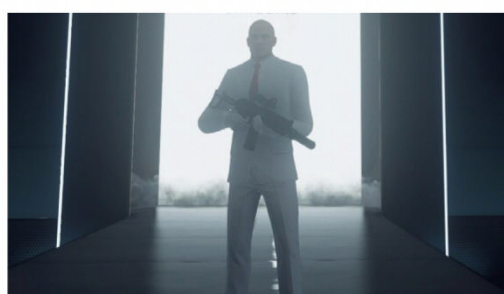
is remote, and its very existence is obnoxious. Why would you work there?

And *oh my god*, what kind of judgemental psychopath have I become, slowly by degrees? This is where *Hitman* is, in fact, a litmus test for your humanity, a moral traffic light, like Tom Waits in *The Fisher King*.

There is a moral dimension baked into the game, but it isn't just in the irredeemable targets or the penalties for non-target kills. There's another level that the laissez-faire attitude to other people's lives comes to highlight. You can target the super-rich as fundamentally unethical, with immoral goals, but the organisation you work for is also corrupt, just another resource for the obscenely wealthy to wield power. Your handler is just yet another sociopath, working through her own grandiose and skewed notions of morality. The Moroccan coup isn't being prevented because that's a good thing, it's just about a defence contract held by a western corporation. 47 can talk about a "just hit" but he's kidding himself. He's a monster too, as ghastly as those

targets. He isn't even doing it for the money. He's doing it because it's all he's ever known. It's what he was created to do. And he's YOU. You are doing it.

There's a level on which the game is saying, it isn't OK to like any of this. You are indulging yourself, immersed in self-righteousness. The degree to which you are enjoying it is a little window into the darkest parts of yourself. You are the Shadow Client. Most therapists will tell you that this is a healthy thing, it's called owning your own shadow. But therapy is hard and upsetting, and sometimes you don't know what to do with what you've found out. In my case, it's that this game isn't meant to be played like this. Attempting to kill everyone has left me wanting to kill no one, in a game all about killing people. Maybe that's the point? Anyway, that's *Hitman* ruined. Thanks a lot, conscience. ■



Almost exactly when this stopped being fun.



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

TEARING THINGS DOWN IN TEARDOWN

Smash and grab. *By Nat Clayton*



RIGHT: That's one way to get to the snack aisle.



Remember the first time you brought a house down in *Red Faction: Guerrilla*? It felt like the start of something new. The beginning of an era of games that would be more tangible, more physical, and more breakable than ever before. Of course, that didn't happen. Games largely focussed on making static scenes look even shinier with sharper textures and ray-traced lighting. But thanks to a small Swedish developer, we have a window into that delightfully destructive alternate world – and believe me when I say *Teardown*'s window shatters very nicely indeed.

At its core, *Teardown* is a game of heists. Each new mission gives you a series of computers to steal, safes to nick, or cars to plunge into the ocean, challenging you to use a limited toolset to carve out a path towards the perfect crime. Don't get me wrong, it's a fun wee challenge – but it's not why I've opened up *Teardown* almost every day for the past year.

I'm playing *Teardown* every day because smashing things up never gets old. *Teardown* might be a voxel game, but Tuxedo Labs has taken great care to build its sandbox levels with true-to-life materials. Smashing a wall with a sledgehammer will crumble plaster while leaving tougher brickwork exposed.

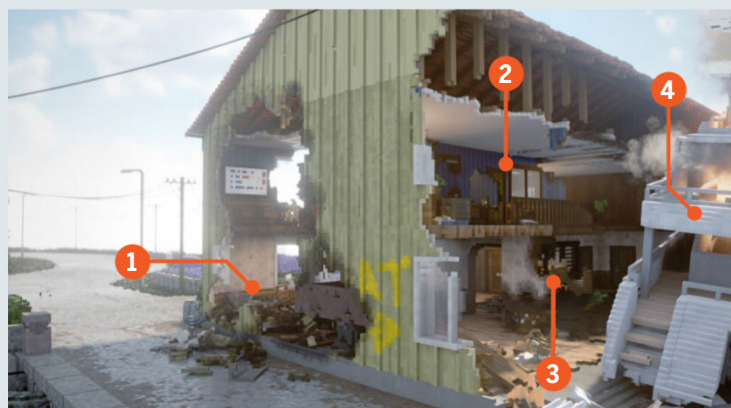
It is the closest (and safest) means games have come to the experience of grabbing a hammer and going to town on a run-down construction site. But that faithfulness to life isn't just met by the materials. See, *Teardown* may be the best (and only) convincing argument I've seen for ray

CARNAGE REPORT

Analysing a symphony of destruction

1 The shape of these holes and signs of blast marks suggest bombs were used to force entry into the building.

2 Once inside, it looks like the suspects used sledgehammers to break into the office.



3 At some point it appears a fire swept through the house, burning the lower levels.

4 ... hold on, did someone toss an entire boat at this building? I give up.

tracing. With every last voxel at risk of being tossed around the map, baked lighting wouldn't cut it – and while *Teardown*'s own ray tracing solution isn't as taxing or as accurate as RTX, it manages to perfectly paint your rubble with accurate lighting.

There's a phenomenal feeling that comes with seeing the light bounce through the hole you just shotgunned

TEARDOWN MAY USE VOXELS, BUT IT USES THEM TO CREATE SOMETHING GORGEOUS

out of a shack roof. Tear the roof off a house in a storm and the furniture inside will become soaked, reflections dappled against their now-slick surfaces. *Teardown* may use voxels, but it uses them to create something utterly gorgeous.

KNOCK 'EM DOWN

That, alone, would be enough to keep me sticking around. Tuxedo Labs itself has done a good enough job

adding new maps to tear apart, letting you cut about a riverside village and urban shopping mall with abandon. But over the past year, mod support has completely transformed *Teardown* from a fun curiosity into a worthy successor to the king of physics sandboxes, *Garry's Mod*.

Teardown's basic destruction can be enhanced. Feel like fires are going out too soon? Download a mod to keep the flames burning as long as possible. And while *Teardown* doesn't track structural integrity (buildings will remain 'floating' if even one voxel is connected to the ground), there are mods to fake this by having explosions cause chain reactions of shockwave damage. This is best seen on miniature city maps, where one tower collapse can bring an entire neighbourhood to rubble.

In recent months, we've also seen mods that add completely new and bizarre modes of play to *Teardown*. My favourite is *Basilisco*, a terrifying killer robot snake that floats through the skies with a piercing red spotlight. Evading this beast on a rain-soaked night map turns *Teardown* into something akin to a survival horror game. You'll hear a ghastly shriek and turn to find what was once an apartment block is now a pile of bricks.

Tuxedo Labs has even been teasing 'Part 2' of *Teardown* lately – adding more physics toys like ropes and thrusters, along with some truly horrific AI robots to stalk you through a map. I'm not just excited about how these will offer more opportunities to break apart the base game – I'm thrilled to see what the community will do to build on and expand these tools.

Dropping into the Steam Workshop to see what's new in *Teardown* has become a fun routine. It feels like popping down the shops, only instead of planning a new recipe for dinner I'm outlining what I want to smash up this week. Either way, something's getting ruined. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Oct 29, 2020

DEVELOPER
Tuxedo Labs

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
teardowngame.com



RIGHT: The eastbound train has been diverted, somewhat.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



SIN

Remembering the last shooter of the pre-*Half-Life* world. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

On November 19, 1998, Sierra released *Half-Life*. In the time it took to install 300MB of exquisitely poised shooter off its CD-ROM, everything from the genre prior became part of a bygone era. And perhaps the unluckiest of the lot was Ritual's *SiN*, which released just ten days before it.

Here was a game that, like *Half-Life*, wanted to bring a bit more storytelling back to the genre after a long period of dominance from dialogue-averse id Software and similarly laconic newcomers Epic Games. It had a spectacularly named hero in John Blade, and in its antagonist Elexis Sinclair a typically salacious depiction of a woman – though to give Ritual some credit, both black player-characters

and female CEOs were wildly progressive ideas for the era. It had voice actors. It was set in a recognisable near-future. There wasn't an inverted cross, alien landscape, or power-up in sight. If John Romero wasn't already turning in the grave he was slowly digging for himself at Ion Storm, the posters on *SiN*'s walls hilariously stating 'Lex to make Romero her bitch' on them would have sealed it.

Though it was destined to be forgotten in Gordon Freeman's wake, the story goes like this: billionaire biotech company owner and apparent PVC fetishist Elexis Sinclair is making dangerous drugs that mutate humans into giant veiny hitboxes down in the Sintek labs. Freeport City PD's finest and most implausibly musclebound colonel John R Blade gets wind of the scheme when his Hardcorps team is

TOP: Don't do drugs, kids – or else.

called into a bank robbery led by a mob boss who abruptly erupts into something beastly and inhuman mid-chase. Blade, with hacker sidekick JC in his earpiece and splicing into various mainframes from back at headquarters, must track down the supply of the street drug U-4 causing the mutations and take down Sintek.

Not one for the Booker shortlist, but *SiN*'s great appeal was, and remains, the sheer exuberance with which it goes about telling that tale. It's a game full of moments that clearly, *transparently* began with someone at Ritual saying, "It'd be cool if..." Design document be damned. Market research can do one. What can this new toy of 3D interactive space do?

It can drop you from a helicopter into a bank heist in progress. It can turn a construction site shootout into a platforming puzzle, and then throw a driveable digger in there purely to allow the player to bash a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1998

DEVELOPER
Ritual Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
bit.ly/3krVRVs



Thus begins another chapter of '90s forced stealth.



hole in the wall in real-time, then get out, and never operate another vehicle again. What was a bombastic corridor shooter in a subway station five minutes ago becomes a stealth game that asks you to sneak around the Sintek labs with nothing but judicious use of the crouch button to mask your presence.

CREEPING DEATH

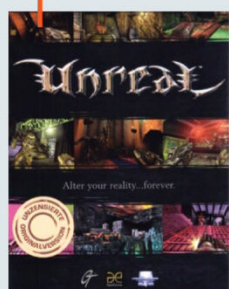
That stealth section, just five missions into the story, proved an impasse for me at the time of *SiN*'s release. It's tricky to shuffle around the many high-identical rooms of the laboratory and tick off the mission objectives without a single NPC, guard or camera spotting me now. To

THERE WASN'T AN INVERTED CROSS, ALIEN LANDSCAPE OR POWER-UP IN SIGHT

13-year-old hands in '98, it was unassailable. It would be months before I'd get to see its later levels. Months spent in the uncaring vision cones of Sintek's spider robots and wall-mounted miniguns. The indignity of Mr Blade himself sliced and diced by high-calibre rounds. Modern sentiment towards such a hurdle at the hands of clumsy stealth mechanics would be damning, but you didn't excommunicate a game for trying something in the beige age.

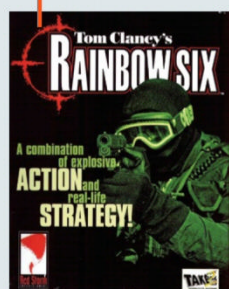
Besides, I'd previously spent several days stuck on a construction site puzzle that required you to look up and shoot a girder out of the sky in order to rupture a water pipe at your feet, allowing Blade to swim out of the hole he was in. And another few days figuring out a platforming run behind some loose bricks and ascending the floors of a derelict building in the precious few seconds before a bomb went off. What was another few weeks reloading the same quicksave?

YEAR OF THE GUN *A timeline of shooters from 1998*



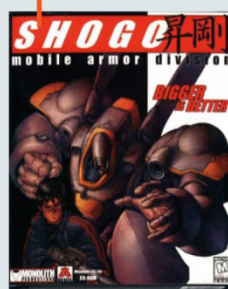
UNREAL
MAY 22

Wake up on a wrecked prison space ship, meet Skarj, shoot Skarj, look incredulously at nice water. Pretty shallow, but *Unreal* made a leap forwards visually from incumbent FPS king *Quake II*.



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX
AUGUST 21

Guns, yes, but also: tactics. A revolutionary idea only diminished by the clumsy planning stage which worked a bit like giving RTS-style orders then executing them.



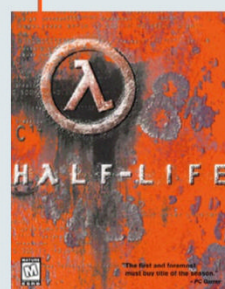
SHOGO M.A.D.
SEPTEMBER 30

Mechs, yes, but also: guns. Will the revolutionary shooter ideas never cease this year? *Monolith's* take on the FPS stood apart from the *Quake* clones. Also about 20 feet taller.



SIN
NOVEMBER 9

As *Quake* and *Unreal* dialled back exposition and dialogue, *SiN* wanted to take FPS gaming in a more cinematic direction. Characters, plot, set-pieces... it was a grand plan.



HALF-LIFE
NOVEMBER 19

It upstaged *SiN*. It made *Unreal* feel like a tech demo. *Tom Clancy's* waypoints and *Shogo's* mechs were laid to waste. So were the next 300 shooters. Gordon changed it all, forever.



» SINCLAIR SPECTRUM

After clearing the stealth mission though, *SiN*'s digressions from the corridor shooting vogue of the time are fewer. Levels within Sinclair's wicked facility can come and go with little imprint on the memory. There's a sense that after the freewheeling nature of its opening levels, any further conversations that began, "It'd be cool if..." ended with, "Yeah, but we ship in two months." Laboratories give way to warehouses and sewage works that might be visiting from any number of other shooters from that period, before *SiN* seems to remember itself again and start flinging absurdly and hilariously disparate locations at you. Oil rigs. Jungle. The ocean floor. All perfectly reasonable places for a policeman to visit in pursuit of an evil biotech boss.

While the cohesion of its levels ebbs and flows in the moment, Ritual's commitment to interactive toys is a constant. Computer consoles are a particular highlight, offering the odd moment of proto-immersive sim problem-solving. Then and now, the kick of disabling a whole area's cameras or turrets from within a security room hits beautifully. You might even pad

Blade's bank balance out by transferring funds from any number of Freeport City Bank's customers, including one Billge Yeates and Elexis Sinclair herself. Evidently nobody told her about company accounts. Twenty-three years later

ABOVE: Mancini was no looker even before the mutation.

it's still unclear what the advantage is of doing this, or why Ritual saw fit to include it in the game. Like so many of *SiN*'s extraneous touches, I'm glad they did.

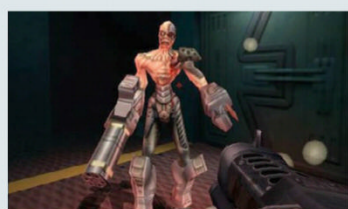
Most lavish of all is the training facility, a lovingly constructed tutorial area that many players would wilfully breeze past on the way to a new game, or fail to spot on the main menu screen. Anyone who does would miss out on the skeet shooting and sniping ranges, the shooting galleries where cardboard terrorists and civilians pop up, and the inconspicuous buttons on the wall that deploy bleachers from the wall, as if all of John's buddies are about to down tools and watch his mastery. Before you even get on the helicopter to that bank, you're sold on the future-cop fantasy.

BLADE RUNNER

Before you install the game, in fact. *SiN*'s manual sets the scene before disc ever meets disc tray, detailing Blade's troubled dreams and disturbed visions in diary form. A life on the beat, it appears, has taken its toll on the man's psyche, and the appearance of a new street drug that makes monsters of people has done nothing to take the load off.

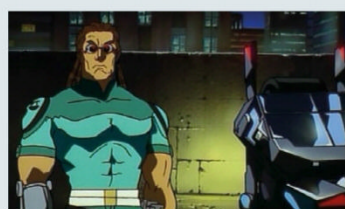
BRINGING LEXY BACK

What Ms Sinclair did next



WAGES OF SIN 1999

An expansion pack that pits John Blade against a crime boss who wants to take over Freeport.



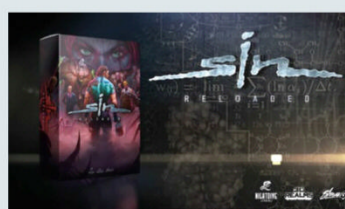
SIN: THE MOVIE 2000

Despite carrying the name, the animated movie adaptation plays pretty fast and loose with canon.



SIN: EPISODES 2006

An episodic sequel with only one episode, titled 'Emergence'. Poor sales did for the rest.



SIN RELOADED 2022?

A Night Dive remake running on the studio's Kex Engine, coming out soon.



He's quite a talented sketch artist too, is John. The nightmare visions he puts into form, all bulging eyes and blood vessels, are expertly drawn, if partially obscured by the manual's faux coffee rings.

Quite *why* Elexis Sinclair wants to make monsters of people, all bulging eyes and blood vessels, is a question *SiN* barely scratches. She's evil. She's super-rich. Her eyebrows arch at an especially cruel angle. That's all the insight as we get into the chief antagonist, which is as much of a shame as the asphyxiating latex she's almost always wearing. As if a buttoned up blouse and pantsuit would have been the difference between playing it and leaving it on the shelf.

Blade and JC fare much better under deeper character scrutiny. In keeping the cocksure young hacker away from the action and thus safe to chip in frequent jibes at his enormous boss, *SiN* finds a way to bring in some buddy cop comedy and make it the game's own.

Having JC there to observe the extraordinary events you're shooting through and then banter with you elevates the story beyond its prosaic plotting. Without a spiky haired white hat watching, Blade would get

SIN FINDS A WAY TO BRING IN BUDDY COP COMEDY AND MAKE IT THE GAME'S OWN

away with donning a lab tech's yellow overalls to disguise himself without ridicule. And that would be infinitely duller. As a helpful objective reminder and mechanic explainer, he's there to address the player as much as the protagonist, but in the end it's JC's warm and insouciant bro-ing out with Blade that stands as one of the game's more enduring components.

AGE OF INNOCENCE

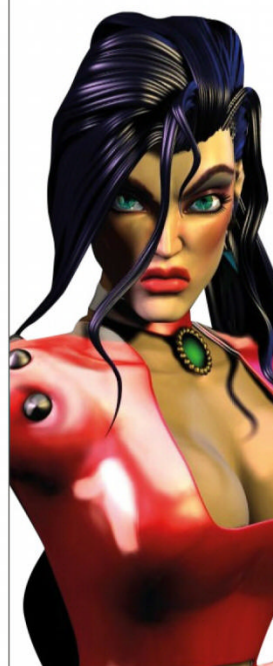
It's natural to feel nostalgic for this halcyon period of PC gaming, particularly since it's been so adept at archiving and updating itself over the years – Night Dive just released a Gold version to Steam featuring the *Wages of SiN* expansion, and plans a full remaster soon. But the exact nature of what was so good about those days anyway can be hard to pinpoint.

Enter a wobbly *Quake II* engine shooter, all ideas and precious little polish, that serves a handy reminder

that a crucial player in the PC gaming golden age was naivety. Ideas, set-pieces, and mechanics thrown in with reckless vigour and scant regard for timelines. Modern game dev is smart and efficient. *SiN* had fully animated bleachers in the skeet shooting range of its optional police training level.

Not that we lavished praise on this game and its ilk for their generosity at the time, you understand. This extravagance is something you can only get a sense of by playing a game now. No, at the time everybody was much too annoyed by the absurdly long load times – and subsequently bewitched by *Half-Life* – to appreciate *SiN* for what it was. The last luddite shooter before the industrial age, happy just to give you a handgun bigger than your entire forearm, a screen full of identical goons, and a driveable JCB you operate for five seconds then park up forever.

Night Dive's typically sterling work means it's perfectly preserved for modern systems and, finally, easy to run on widescreen monitors. But Ritual's plaudits are long overdue for crafting a shooter whose charms and replayability far exceed our estimations in 1998. ■



TYLER WILDE



I recently bought a TV so that I can stop watching movies at my desk with the ShadowPlay overlay visible. It was expensive, so here are some not so expensive games.



QUAKE (ENHANCED)

bethesda.net/game/quake

→ A remaster of the inspiration for all the filthy-looking, hard-angle-having shooters people over 35 keep making for each other. Make sure to rebind the mouse and keyboard controls to some ridiculous pre-WASD configuration for the old school experience.



CALL OF JUAREZ: GUNSLINGER

bit.ly/3bbmhWE

→ No mucking about around here: Just lots of dudes popping up from behind Old West things – bars, wagons, you know – and getting shot by you. £11 and 4.65GB gets you five or so hours of what we correctly considered high quality fun in 2013. Regularly on sale for even less.



COOKIE CLICKER

orteil.dashnet.org/cookieclicker

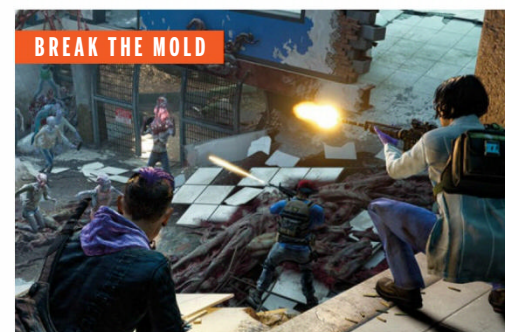
→ The infamous web game about clicking on a cookie to make more cookies is now on Steam for £4. If you're unsure why you'd want to click on a cookie to make more cookies, then try the free web version first. You may spend several hours not finding the answer.



PLEASE, DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING

bit.ly/3jF0j1a

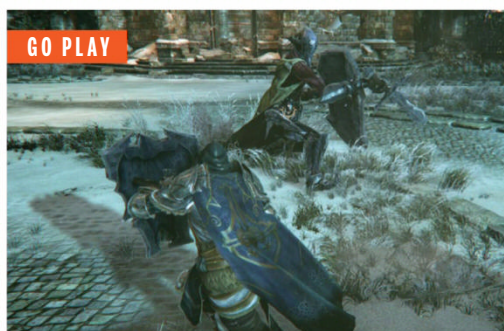
→ Before the great *Loop Hero*, developer Four Quarters made this £4 game in which you aren't meant to touch anything. But if you do press the big red button on the control panel you're meant to leave alone, something might happen. And isn't that all we want in life?



BACK 4 BLOOD

back4blood.com

→ The unofficial *Left 4 Dead 3* is £50, which does feel a bit outdated for a four-player co-op game, even though it's worth it. But *B4B* is also on Xbox Game Pass for PC, so you and your friends can go get chomped by a horde of zombos for £8 a month instead, if you want.



LORDS OF THE FALLEN

bit.ly/2Zjg8oF

→ Instead of staring at the *Elden Ring* subreddit waiting for new details, play a game that probably isn't as good as *Elden Ring* will be, but will sate your thirst for dodging giant swords anyway. *LotF* has gotten a few patches since my 58% review, and regularly goes on sale for £4.



FUSER

fuser.com

→ £50 felt too pricey for this nifty Harmonix DJing sim, regardless of how much I enjoyed defacing recent hits by ruthlessly dropping the vocal track from Smash Mouth's *All Star* into the middle of them. A year later, *Fuser* is down to a much more agreeable £18. Go ruin some songs.



PUNCH CLUB

lazybeargames.com/game/punch-club

→ I've recently gotten to know some amateur boxers, and it turns out that *Punch Club* presents a pretty accurate picture of a boxer's life: work, train, eat, sleep, fight. Granted, none of the boxers I've met have fought any crocodiles yet, but I'm sure that'll happen any day now.



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